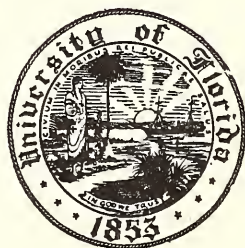



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New British Drama

John Russell Taylor



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Introduction

‘The novel . . . in England at least has been the natural prose form for a creative mind to adopt since the time of Richardson.’

So, at any rate, said Robert Liddell in his *Treatise on the Novel*, first published in 1947, and then probably no one would have disagreed with him. But now one would have to add a vital coda: until John Osborne. The whole picture of writing in this country has undergone a transformation in the last five years or so, and the event which marks ‘then’ off decisively from ‘now’ is the first performance of *Look Back in Anger* on 8 May 1956. Not that this event was startlingly novel in itself. John Osborne was 26 at the time, which is young but not extraordinarily so; Noel Coward made a similar impact at an even earlier age with *The Vortex*. What is important about it is the success the play enjoyed and the consequences this had for a whole generation of writers; writers who fifty, fifteen or even five years before would probably have adopted the novel as their chosen form but now, all of a sudden, were moved to try their hand at drama and, even more surprisingly, found companies to stage their works and audiences to appreciate them.

For *Look Back in Anger* had a *succès d’estime*, a *succès de scandale*, and finally just a *succès*. It was constantly revived at the Royal Court, went on tour, was staged all over the world, made into a film, and in the end even turned up in a novelized version as the book of the film of the play. It was not just another play by another young writer, staged in a fit of enterprise by a provincial rep and then forgotten; it was something much more, something suspiciously like big business, and for the first time the idea got around that there might be money in young dramatists and young drama. Rather in the same way that French film producers began to feel differently about young directors after *Et Dieu Créa la Femme*, theatres began to feel differently about young writers, and with a new willingness to consider staging new plays by new and unknown writers came, not surprisingly, the new and unknown writers to supply the plays.

What sort of young writers came, and what sort of plays they wrote, is the principal subject of this book. It has, ideally, more to do with art than commerce, since what matters finally is the plays that get written and staged, not the way that this came about. But commerce, of course, has a great deal to do with art, especially an art, like the theatre (or the cinema, or television), in which a large amount of money has to be spent, and a large number of people employed, to bring to fruition a work which began in one man's brain. Idealists there are now in the theatre, as there always have been, and some of them – George Devine, Joan Littlewood, and others – play a large part in these pages, because they have played a large part in making the British drama as we know it today possible. But even they could not do what they have done without an audience to back them up, a shrewd ability to pay for the failure of some plays with the success of others, and a clear grasp of the theatre as a commercial venture.

So we should not overlook the commercial side of things. The success of *Look Back in Anger* started the movement off, and the success of other, later plays – *A Taste of Honey*, *The Hostage*, *The Caretaker* – has kept it going. Without these successes it would rapidly founder, but while they continue the hope of finding another success of the sort will induce people to put money into new plays, even if the financial results of doing so are often disappointing. It will serve as an additional inducement to the young writer to look to the stage as an advantageous way of putting his talents to work; where the ultimate success was not so long ago a best-selling novel, now it is a hit play. For writers are only human. Ivy Compton-Burnett once remarked: 'I would write for a few dozen people; and it sometimes seems that I do so; but I would not write for no one.' If there were little likelihood of anything one wrote in dramatic form ever reaching production at all, then most writers would turn to other fields of activity: they want an audience, and, reasonably enough, they want some return for their labours. But if successful production is at least a reasonable possibility, as during these last few years it has been for young dramatists, then anyone with the slightest desire to try his hand at a play will do so.

And this is just what has happened. Not all the plays which have emerged have been good, of course, or even interesting, and the mere fact that a playwright is under forty can hardly be regarded as a guarantee of quality by even the most optimistic. But there is a hard core of exciting new writing in the theatre, almost entirely from writers under forty, and quite often from writers under thirty. They have, moreover, two further distinguishing features: their tremendous variety and patent unwillingness to fall neatly behind any one standard or one leader; and the fact that the great majority of them have working-class origins. The first quality is striking enough: with the great commercial success of *Look Back in Anger* one would have expected a host of imitations to follow, but, in fact, there has never been any 'School of Osborne', and Anger in his special sense has on the whole been conspicuous by its absence. A 'movement' which can encompass, say, *Roots*, *The Caretaker*, *A Taste of Honey*, *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, *What Shall We Tell Caroline?*, *Progress to the Park*, *One Way Pendulum*, and *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* can be accused of many things (including being too incoherent to merit the name of movement at all), but hardly of conformity or readiness to follow the easy line of the established popular success.

Even stranger in the context of British dramatic history, however, is the second fact about these writers, their predominantly working-class origin. For many years the West End stage has been a middle-class preserve: middle-class writers, more often than not university educated, have written for mainly middle-class audiences. But now things are different. Few of the new writers have been to university – John Arden and John Mortimer are exceptional in this respect – though whether they could any of them hope to escape the university net were they aged about ten now is another matter. Arnold Wesker is the son of a Jewish tailor in the East End, and Harold Pinter, too, comes from an East End Jewish family; Shelagh Delaney, as all the world knows, comes from Salford and did not even manage to scrape into the local grammar school; Alun Owen is Liverpool-Welsh, an ex-Bevin boy turned straight-man to music-hall comics at the time he wrote his first play; he and several others, John Osborne, Clive Exton, and Harold Pinter among them, have worked their

way up from the ranks, as it were, after periods spent with varying degrees of success as humble repertory actors. This reversal of a pattern accepted almost without question for several generations is remarkable enough in itself to set one looking for reasons. Why should these people start writing at all – and why should the theatre, of all things, occur to them as the best, perhaps the only possible, medium for their work?

It is always tempting to try and evolve a cast-iron theory at the outset to account for phenomena of this sort, and then proceed, predictably enough, to find it conclusively borne out by each succeeding case one examines. I am not sure that there is any one answer to cover every instance or even an answer that applies to a majority of the writers studied. What I try to do in this book is to study their finished work as it exists, on the stage and on the printed page, and at the same time to give some account of how it came to birth, what the circumstances of its first staging were, and what reasons, if any, the writers themselves put forward for their choice of medium and their continued cultivation of it. I have resisted the temptation also to group them into schools or even by certain communities of interest: it would be easy to draw up an arbitrary list of realists and oppose it with an equally arbitrary list of non-realists, to postulate a school of Brecht or a school of Ionesco and line up writers behind their supposed leaders, but this again is bound to lead sooner or later to at least a slight sacrifice of truth in favour of neatness, a readiness to stress what writers have in common rather than what makes them different, which can only in the end do violence to their integrity as individuals, each with something to offer which no other writer can quite match.

As it happens, however, a natural arrangement presents itself, and that is the one I have followed. For since 1956 each year has brought a new wave of writers, and in each case there has been one thing recognizably in common about their arrival, if nothing else. First there was John Osborne and the whole batch of new dramatists brought forward after his success by the English Stage Company at the Royal Court. Then it was the turn of Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop at Stratford, E., to come to prominence with Brendan Behan, Shelagh Delaney, and

a number of lesser figures. 1959 was the year which really brought the work going on out of town into the London lime-light, with Arnold Wesker's *Roots* from Coventry and all that led to. And before the excitement from that had died down yet another group appeared on the theatrical horizon, loaded with laurels acquired in the more enterprising sections of television drama: Clive Exton built a solid reputation on television alone, Alan Owen began on radio and came to maturity on television before returning to new successes on the stage, and even Harold Pinter had to wait until television had enabled him to reach a mass audience without preconceptions before the more conservative West End audience could be persuaded to take serious note of him.

So this is the order in which we shall encounter the young playwrights, and incidentally some of the important *éminences grises* of British drama – producers, directors, impresarios and policy-makers – who have helped to make their achievements possible and brought about the theatrical revolution we are still living through today.

We shall meet them in some surprising places, for nowadays perhaps more than ever before drama is not just a matter of theatre, though there is still the feeling abroad that the dramatist needs a definitive West End success before he has truly arrived. Today the dramatist has at his disposal not only the theatre but radio, television, and the cinema, and few of the writers discussed in this book have, in fact, confined themselves entirely to the stage, while several have had experience in all four. Even leaving aside those who have started or up to now made their major impact outside the theatre, the established theatre writers have produced a considerable body of work, particularly on television, which clamours for inclusion, and without which our picture of them would be incomplete and distorted. So for the purpose of our study television plays, radio plays, and even in one or two instances film scripts, will be treated on an equal footing with stage plays, entirely on their merits as constituent parts of the writer's complete dramatic creation.

But before the curtain rises on 8 May 1956 there is some

scene-setting to be done and one or two forerunners to be mentioned. If ever a revolution began with one explosion it was this, but in what circumstances did the explosion take place? This I shall try to explain in the first chapter, even if it involves reaching as far back into the mists of antiquity as 1951, the Year of the Festival.

Prologue

The Early Fifties

WITH PRACTICALLY ANY 'overnight revolution' it turns out, when one comes to look more closely, that the signs were there to be read by anyone with enough foresight and that the revolution proper was only the final culmination of a whole string of minor skirmishes with whatever party happened to be in control at the time. Was this the case in the British theatre in the years before Osborne? Let us see.

At this distance of time it is difficult to recapture the flavour of that now remote era, but perhaps the best way to begin is to take a look at what was happening in London during the previous year. As usual, most of the big critical successes – those which were felt to add appreciably to the cultural life of the city – were foreign. It was, you will recall, Ugo Betti year, when after a belated discovery by the Third Programme he emerged in the West End with three plays, *The Burnt Flowerbed*, *The Queen and the Rebels*, and *Summertime*. There were also *The Waltz of the Toreadors* (Anouilh), *The Count of Clerembard* (Aymé), *Hotel Paradiso* (Feydeau), *Nina* (Roussin), *The Strong are Lonely* (Hochwalder), *The Threepenny Opera* (Brecht) – and *Waiting for Godot*, which surprised everyone by going on from the Arts to become a commercial as well as a critical success. (Ionesco also appeared unobtrusively in February 1955, when *The Lesson* was a little-noticed curtain-raiser at the Arts, but his real impact was delayed until the coupling there of *The Bald Prima Donna* and *The New Tenant* in November 1956.) America, equally as usual, contributed a sizeable portion of our theatrical fare with musicals (*Plain and Fancy*, *The Pajama Game*) and straight plays of various sorts (*Anniversary Waltz*, *Gigi*, *The Good Sailor*, *The Rainmaker*).

From British authors, there were an unusual number of artless musicals; in addition to *The Boy Friend* and *Salad Days*, which ran throughout the year, there were another Sandy Wilson *The Buccaneer*, *A Girl called Jo*, *Romance in Candlelight*, *She Smiled at Me*, *Summer Song*, *Twenty Minutes South*, *The Water Gipsies*,

Wild Grows the Heather, and *Wild Thyme*; there were also a number of forgotten light comedies and thrillers, one of which, *The House by the Lake*, starring Flora Robson, was one of the year's big hits. But what was there which might be supposed to enhance the reputation of the British theatre? Well, there were a couple of good revivals (Frankie Howerd in *Charley's Aunt*, a glittering *Misalliance* from H. M. Tennent) and three notable seasons: the Gielgud-Ashcroft season at the Palace (*King Lear* and *Much Ado*), John Clements at the Saville (*The Wild Duck*, *The Rivals* and a capable new political drama, Norman King's *The Shadow of Doubt*), and the Brook-Scofield season at the Phoenix, which offered memorable productions of *The Family Reunion*, *Hamlet* and one new play, *The Power and the Glory*, which turned out to be Pierre Bost's French version of Greene's novel Englished by Denis Cannan. But at least Cannan, since *Captain Carvallo*, had been a name to conjure with; he was 'promising' and certainly a ray of hope on the dim theatrical scene. Otherwise it could hardly be said that new drama had much to offer. Two veterans were seen off form, Coward with *South Sea Bubble* and Priestley with *Mr Kettle and Mrs Moon*. Rattigan, the reigning king of the English stage, had *Separate Tables* still running from the previous year, and another 'veteran', Gerald Savory, scored a mild success with a slightly Chekhovian comedy *A Likely Tale*. Of the 'post-war' playwrights, few as they were, only one, Peter Ustinov, had a play staged, *Romanoff and Juliet*, which though far from his best proved a big success. Fry, the great reviver of that verse drama which people had been expecting to save the theatre for the previous ten years or so, had been silent since *The Dark is Light Enough* in the previous year, and would remain so, translations apart, until *Curtmantle* in 1961. The same almost exactly was true of John Whiting, centre of controversy since his *Saint's Day* won the Arts Council prize in 1951: his *Marching Song* of 1954 had achieved no great success with the public, although some critics liked it, and apart from a couple of television scripts and an abortive out-of-town tour he eschewed drama until *The Devils* seven years later. The only decisive success of the year on every level, in fact, was almost the most anachronistic play of

them all, the novelist Enid Bagnold's glittering and artificial high comedy *The Chalk Garden*, which could have been written almost unaltered at any time since Wilde.

And was this really all? To all intents and purposes, yes. A new surrealistic revue, *Cranks*, by the choreographer John Cranko seemed to presage a breakaway from the genre's routine theatrical parish-pumpery. A new manager called Michael Codron put on a comedy called *Send for Catty*, but it would have taken quite abnormal prescience to recognize here the future impresario of Mortimer and Pinter. A small and struggling company, Theatre Workshop, which had hitherto concentrated mainly on classical revivals and occasional didactic political pieces, achieved the first West End transfer from their East London home, the Theatre Royal, Stratford, with *The Good Soldier Schweik*, dramatized by Ewan MacColl from Hašek. And in April 1956 a new group, the English Stage Company, took over the Royal Court Theatre with the avowed intention of putting on new plays in repertory. Their first production, *The Mulberry Bush*, by the novelist Angus Wilson, had, in fact, been previously produced in Bristol, and though it got mixed notices it was generally agreed to be interesting and enterprising. Their second was a superior Broadway hit, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. And their third was *Look Back in Anger*, which opened just over a month after the management had been installed.

But before this happened one would have been quite justified in regarding the year as something very much like the end of an era. One by one the theatre clubs and brave little try-out theatres were closing (the New Watergate, the New Lindsey, the Boltons, the Q) and only the Arts remained with sufficient facilities to do justice to a difficult new work, when it could find one (*Waiting for Godot* and *The Waltz of the Toreadors* began at the Arts; the only new native play was a rather precious and high-flown poetic drama, *Darkling Child*, by W. S. Merwin and Dido Milroy.) But finding new drama of sufficient interest was the main problem, and though new plays by new playwrights did emerge quite frequently, the main defence offered for British drama when it was compared (unfavourably, of course) with what was being produced in America, France, and elsewhere

was that really Rattigan had shown himself in *The Browning Version* and *The Deep Blue Sea* to be a major international dramatist and it was only native British modesty which prevented us from realizing the fact. Even the most enthusiastic defenders of this view, however, could not deny that exciting new dramatists had been rather thin on the ground since Rattigan. There had been the post-war revival of poetic drama, led by Christopher Fry, who after a couple of pre-war religious pieces scored a surprise success with *A Phoenix Too Frequent* in 1946 and especially *The Lady's Not For Burning* (1948) and proceeded with a sequence of seasonal plays (*Venus Observed*, 1950, and *The Dark is Light Enough*, 1954) to show that verse drama could be good box-office as well (naturally, the presence of such luminaries as John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, and Edith Evans in his casts did not harm the plays' chances at all either). But apart from the unexpected reappearance of T. S. Eliot in the London theatre with *The Cocktail Party* (1949) and *The Confidential Clerk* (1953), Fry's championship of poetry in the theatre went more or less unsupported, the appeal of other verse dramatists proving either merely modish (Ronald Duncan's *This Way to the Tomb*) or too parochial (Norman Nicholson's *Old Man of the Mountains*; Anne Ridler's *The Shadow Factory*) and soon most practitioners of verse drama betook themselves to the radio, where Louis MacNeice in particular had outstanding successes with such plays as *The Dark Tower*, *Christopher Columbus* and *The Queen of Air and Darkness*.

And since this particular revival had fizzled out there had been very little. There was Peter Ustinov, of course, who had been 'promising' since *House of Regrets* in 1942 (when he was twenty-one) and after a sequence of eccentric and personal half-successes like *Blow Your Own Trumpet*, *The Banbury Nose*, and *The Indifferent Shepherd*, had at last achieved a solid success with his satirical comedy *The Love of Four Colonels* (1951), which confirmed critics in the idea that one of these days he might at last produce an unmistakable masterpiece; unfortunately they hoped for a 'serious' masterpiece, while his more serious pieces – *The Moment of Truth*, *The Empty Chair* – seemed mainly to confirm that his real talent was for grotesque comedy. But at

least *Romanoff and Juliet* revived hopes for him; hopes, alas, which despite *Paris Not So Gay* have not yet been justified.

Then there were a couple of older writers who really came to theatrical prominence only in the fifties: Graham Greene, for instance, whose first play, *The Living Room* (1953), though offering nothing very new to readers of his novels, did prove something of a sensation in a West End theatre starved of ideas (rather as his original film script *The Third Man* had done in the British cinema), and who has continued to demonstrate a satisfactory grasp of the playwright's craft in *The Potting Shed* and *The Complaisant Lover*. Another was N. C. Hunter, whose earliest play had been produced as long before as 1934, but who first became a name to reckon with when his *Waters of the Moon* was taken up as a suitable prestige production for Festival year (1951) and packed with stars, headed by Edith Evans and Sybil Thorndike. The same almost inevitable success attended his second play staged in similar circumstances, *A Day by the Sea*, with John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, and Sybil Thorndike, and his third, *A Touch of the Sun*, with Michael Redgrave and Diana Wynyard. The unkind said that nothing could fail with such casts (an assertion recently disproved by Enid Bagnold's *The Last Joke*, which ran barely six weeks despite the presence in its cast of Gielgud and Richardson); the kind said that because of the casts assembled the plays themselves had received too little attention. The truth, as usual, is betwixt and between: Hunter's plays are as well put together as any in the English theatre, with good meaty acting parts, lively, literate dialogue and a real feeling for atmosphere of a tenuous sub-Chekhovian nature (resembling Chekhov, that is, as usually misunderstood by British actors and directors). They even, particularly *A Touch of the Sun*, have their moments of original observation, but basically they are the work of a solid, academic dramatist, and that, though not a little, is perhaps not quite enough.

Now, who does that leave us? On the stage, at least, no one very much except Denis Cannan and John Whiting (the proviso 'on the stage' is necessary, as we shall see later). Denis Cannan (born 1919) has only once, with *Captain Carvalho* in 1950, obtained a success commensurate with his obvious talents, and the

reason for this is not too difficult to see: since his first play *Max*, an uncharacteristic stab at intense drama on the subject of conflicting ideologies, he has concentrated, not on comedy of ideas, which is a recognized if chancy English form, but on intelligent farce, which to most British playgoers sounds like a contradiction in terms. *Captain Carvalho* itself is almost as much comedy as it is farce, and therefore more acceptable than the rest, particularly as it introduces a note of seriousness at the end after its witty variations on the theme of the victor wooing the vanquished in the shape of their prettier women-folk. The theme again is, of course, the conflict of ideologies, and the close thematic relationship between *Max* and *Captain Carvalho*, in fact, serves to underline the principle behind most of Cannan's work – one particularly hard for London playgoers to swallow in practice – that tragedy and farce are merely different sides of the same medal. The theme of conflicting ideologies as material for farce recurs in *Misery Me!*, which is based on one of the principal balances in ordinary life – the balance between two sworn enemies which gives meaning to their lives and would be destroyed if either were removed – and on an inquiry concerning the nature and durability of love. The matter was found too weighty for its framework and the play survived barely three weeks in London.

In his two later plays Cannan appears to have learnt the lesson, since in neither *You and Your Wife* nor *Who's Your Father?* is there much suggestion of a 'message'. The first makes two dissentient married couples (one husband is about to run off with the other's wife) try to sort out their problems while held in captivity by a couple of improbable gangsters, and the second involves a snobbish *nouveau-riche* couple in all sorts of agonizing complications when their daughter's irresponsible fiancé poses as a genealogist and offers them some pretty disreputable antecedents, so that when a bishop turns up to claim the father as his long-lost son he is understandably mistaken for a white-slaver and bribed to leave the country. Neither has any great pretensions to penetration of character (never Cannan's strong point); instead they manoeuvre their puppet-characters through a series of intricately devised comic situations more in

the manner of a latter-day Feydeau. Consequently their sophisticated agility mystified the sort of audience who might approve of basic farce at the Whitehall, while audiences who might have enjoyed them were put off by never quite knowing whether they were supposed to be taken seriously or not. However, audiences are becoming less and less inclined to demand such unequivocal indications from their playwrights, and Denis Cannan may yet come into his own.

John Whiting (born 1915) is a more complex case: his arrival was more spectacular and his subsequent withdrawal from the theatre more complete, and while Denis Cannan did not make his initial impact specifically as something new in the theatre, Whiting decidedly did. He began as an actor after a period at R.A.D.A., and continued to act after being demobbed in 1945. His first play, *Conditions of Agreement*, was written shortly after the war, and was put away to be rewritten later for television as *A Walk in the Desert*, of which Whiting subsequently remarked: 'The critics said "What on earth is he doing? He's forty something and he's writing like a twenty-eight year old." They were dead right, of course. I changed a good deal, but I couldn't get away from the basic thing.' His next play, *Saint's Day* (1947-49), was also put away unproduced for a while, and then he wrote *A Penny for a Song*, a fantastic poetic comedy (in prose, although one or two critics tried to enrol him among Fry's followers on the strength of it) about two Dorset eccentrics, one a blustering would-be strategist, the other a gentle firefighter, at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. This was actually his first play to be staged (in 1951) and though not particularly successful commercially it marked him as certainly a writer to watch. Some six months later the earlier *Saint's Day* was picked as one of the three finalists in the Arts Councils Festival of Britain Play Competition, was produced at the Arts to the general incomprehension of critics and public, and then, amid a storm of protest, awarded the prize.

If one looks again at *Saint's Day* now it is very difficult to understand why it should have caused all this fuss – certainly it is no more exotic or obscure than many of the television plays which are now accepted without demur. But then *The Times*

drama critic found it 'of a badness that must be called indescribable' and provoked a correspondence in the course of which Tyrone Guthrie and Peter Brook called it 'remarkable' and found 'its passion and its unbroken tension . . . the products of a new and extraordinary theatrical mind', while Peggy Ashcroft and John Gielgud called it 'moving, beautiful, and fascinating'. Both sides in the dispute seem in retrospect to exaggerate. The play, which takes as its theme one of perennial fascination to Whiting, self-destruction, is visibly immature, overloaded with literary and philosophical reference and playing its plot (which concerns an old writer obsessed with the idea that people are plotting to kill him who, with the other members of his household and a visiting critic, is swept into a series of violent actions skirting if not toppling into melodrama and ending in a number of violent deaths) for considerably more than it is worth. It is rather pretentious in conception, sometimes absurd, and yet at the same time it does generate a powerful theatrical excitement if one allows oneself to be carried away by the momentum of the piece and not ask too many awkward questions.

The third play in this group, *Marching Song* (1954), again takes up the theme of self-destruction: it concerns the dilemma of a general offered the choice of suicide or a trial and public disgrace. Feeling he has nothing to live for, he is about to commit suicide, as the Chancellor wants, when he is distracted by a young girl who restores to him the will to live. Should he choose to live, at any cost? To decide this he must explore his own motives, his own pride, and his discovery of a flaw in that pride (he lost a battle because he refused to plough his tanks through a mass of children to victory, for once putting humanity before his pride in military achievement), before he can choose, quite calmly, to die. This emerged as Whiting's most balanced and artistically successful play to date, eloquently written and creating its dramatic tensions very cunningly, even though almost all the action is internal rather than external. (For this reason Whiting calls it 'an anti-theatrical play'.) It is distinguished, it is formidably intelligent, and yet somehow it is all just a little cold and lifeless, just as *Saint's Day* was over-literary and allusive and *A Penny for a Song*, despite its charm

and invention, a little lacking in real impetus and *élan*. Their qualities, in a word, are such as could give great pleasure to a properly conditioned audience, but could never hope to take an unprepared audience by storm.

It is significant, in this connexion, to compare the reception of the earlier play with that of *The Devils* in 1961, when Whiting returned to the London theatre after a seven-year silence – a voluntary withdrawal, it seems, during which he worked on film scripts, wrote a bitter comedy, *The Gates of Summer* (1956), which never reached London, and one short and insignificant television thriller, *Eye Witness*. In *The Devils*, which draws its subject from Aldous Huxley's book *The Devils of Loudun*, we find precisely the same qualities as in *Marching Song*: great skill in marshalling the material, great intelligence in its analysis and recreation in dramatic terms, and a remarkable flair for eloquent dialogue which only lets the author down (as it let Shaw down at a similar point in *St Joan*) when a great emotional profession of faith is needed beyond the scope of cool, intelligent appraisal. But with all its skill and intelligence the play lacks something: in particular the choice of the rather ordinary libertine priest Grandier rather than the possessed nun, Soeur Jeanne des Anges, his chief tormentor, as the central figure seems a mistake, especially as it involves simplifying the motives of the nuns (who are made conscious deceivers over their supposed diabolical possession instead of self-deluding neurotics) to the point where they become not only tiresomely commonplace but in the historical context totally incredible. The choice of Grandier as centrepiece is obviously deliberate (again, the theme is self-destruction) and the re-distribution of dramatic emphasis consequent upon it is deliberate, but that does not prevent one thinking it basically wrong, since it makes the material seem that much less interesting than intrinsically it is. But nevertheless *The Devils* has been hailed as a masterpiece, or nearly, by most of the critics, and has achieved a considerable success with the public where Whiting's earlier plays flopped ignominiously. *The Devils* was obviously a happy first choice for commission by the recently established London branch of the Stratford Memorial Theatre company, and Whiting has been

commissioned to write them another. He has also completed an enigmatic one-acter *No Why*, involving (again) a suicide, this time a child's. The audience is now conditioned, and Whiting, honourable precursor of the new drama, has reappeared at last to ride on the wave of its success.

So that was the London theatre between the Festival and *Look Back in Anger*. Television was still finding its feet, and there is nothing much to be looked for there (indeed, the independent network, from which most of the more exciting television drama has come, did not begin operations, even on a very restricted basis, until September 1955). Radio was rather better, and indeed in general the Third Programme proves the brightest spot in a depressing picture: two dramatists in particular, Henry Reed, known to the stage only for his translations of Betti, and Giles Cooper, who gravitated to radio after having a play, *Never Get Out*, produced at the Gateway in 1950 (and later at the Arts), ventured boldly into new territory which would in those days have yielded very little in the way of possibilities for the commercial stage. Reed's work is often nearer the 'feature' than drama proper, as in programmes like the autobiographical *Return to Naples* and the impressionistic *Streets of Pompeii*; sometimes, indeed, as in his brilliant series on Herbert Reeve, Hilda Tablett, General Gland, and the rest (a saga begun with *A Very Great Man Indeed*), it is inspired spoofing of the feature.

Giles Cooper (born 1918) is more relevant to our purpose, however, since all his best works are very definitely 'plays', even though some of them are so conceived as to be virtually unthinkable in terms of any medium but radio. From *Never Get Out*, an elusive duologue between an army deserter and a disconsolate woman with a death wish set in a house supposedly about to be bombed, Cooper has specialized in the exploration of strange emotional states in the margin of human experience, sometimes with strongly macabre overtones and generally on the surface at least in terms of comedy. A whole series of progressively more experimental plays culminated in *Mathry Beacon* (1956), a composite picture of the lives of a group of soldiers looking after a deflector hidden away in the Welsh mountains. His characteristic sinister-comic mode has subsequently been seen to

advantage in such fantasies as *Unman, Wittering and Zigo*, an obsessive tale of a teacher's persecution by his pupils; *Part of the View*, in which a Nigerian governess takes a roundabout revenge on her English employers for their condescension and ironically thereby saves their marriage; *Before the Monday*, in which an innocent and a would-be suicide gradually change places; *Without the Grail*, about mysterious happenings in a mad planter's private kingdom in the Assam hills, and *The Return of General Forefinger*, in which the desire of a general's widow to recover all the statues of her husband scattered round the world is met by a sculptor who secretly makes them himself (the list of plot-situations is wearisome, but it does give some idea of his range). One or two of these, like *Mathry Beacon*, would not work anywhere but on radio; others, like *Before the Monday* and *Without the Grail*, are quite conceivable in stage terms if properly adapted, as *Without the Grail* was by Cooper himself for television. There seemed, in fact, no intrinsic reason by 1960 why Cooper should not, if he so desired, turn his attentions successfully to the stage which in 1950 had clearly not been ready for him, and now, finally, he is about to do so with a new play, *Everything in the Garden*. With his extraordinary skill in the invention of lively, expressive dialogue and unexpected but telling dramatic situations he should rapidly prove to be a considerable acquisition.

But even in spite of Whiting, Cannan, and Cooper (most of whose best work dates in any case from after the advent of the 'new drama'), the outlook for the young dramatist must have looked fairly grim around the beginning of 1956. There was hardly a straw in the wind, since it would have been an optimist indeed who relied too strongly on the English Stage Company or Theatre Workshop to save the day. Anyway, managers and critics would ask each other periodically, where was the new dramatic talent to be found? And what sort of reception would the public give it if and when it did emerge? – none too enthusiastic if the experience of Whiting and Cannan was anything to go by. Then, on 8 May 1956 came the revolution. . . .

Presented at Court

Enter the English Stage Company

THOUGH IN RECENT YEARS the legend has grown up that when *Look Back in Anger* opened it was greeted with almost universal incomprehension and dislike until Kenneth Tynan in *The Observer* saved the situation with a glowing recommendation, this is, in fact, far from being the case. Tynan was certainly the most unequivocally enthusiastic, but the reception of the play, or at any rate of the playwright, was almost uniformly favourable, and with a couple of exceptions everyone agreed that Mr Osborne was a dramatist to watch and that this was just the sort of thing required to justify the new company's existence.

T. C. Worsley in the *New Statesman*, for example, caught the prevailing opinion very well when he wrote: 'As a play *Look Back in Anger* hardly exists. The author has written all the soliloquies for his Wolverhampton Hamlet and virtually left out all the other characters and all the action. But in these soliloquies you can hear the authentic new tone of the Nineteen-Fifties, desperate, savage, resentful and, at times, very funny. This is the kind of play which, for all its imperfections, the English Stage Company ought to be doing. . . .' In the *Daily Express* John Barber put the same view rather more briskly: 'It is intense, angry, feverish, undisciplined. It is even crazy. But it is young, young, young.' In *The Financial Times* Derek Granger, describing *Look Back in Anger* as 'this arresting, painful and sometimes astonishing first play', said of it: 'Mr Osborne communicates no sense to us that he has taken even three paces back from the work that has so hotly and tormentedly engaged him. But for all that this is a play of extraordinary importance. Certainly it seems to have given the English Stage Company its first really excited sense of occasion. And its influence should go far beyond such an eccentric and contorted one-man turn as the controversial *Waiting for Godot*.'

Even those who had more serious doubts about the play itself found Osborne an exciting new writer. Cecil Wilson in the *Daily Mail* felt that the English Stage Company 'have not discovered

a masterpiece, but they *have* discovered a dramatist of outstanding promise: a man who can write with a searing passion, but happens in this case to have lavished it on the wrong play. . . . The repetitiousness cries out for the knife. But through all the author's overwriting and laborious shock tactics, we can perceive what a brilliant play this young man will write when he has got this one out of his system and let a little sunshine into his soul.' The *Daily Worker* agreed, remarking that the play 'starts rich in promise, but lets us down with a sickening melodramatic thud', and concluding that Osborne's 'development as a writer will depend on what he looks forward to'. For Milton Shulman in the *Evening Standard*, *Look Back in Anger* 'aims at being a despairing cry, but achieves only the stature of a self-pitying snivel. . . . But underneath the rasping, negative whine of this play one can distinguish the considerable promise of its author. Mr John Osborne has a dazzling aptitude for provoking and stimulating dialogue, and he draws character with firm convincing strokes. When he stops being angry – or when he lets us in on what he is angry about – he may write a very good play.'

Of the three 'quality' dailies *The Manchester Guardian* (as it then was) and *The Daily Telegraph* were, on the whole, more for than against: Philip Hope-Wallace in the *Guardian* called it 'this strongly felt but rather muddled first drama' and concluded that 'It is by no means a total success artistically, but it has enough tension, feeling and originality of theme to make the [English Stage Company's] choice understandable. . . . I believe that they have got a potential playwright at last. . . .' In the *Telegraph* Patrick Gibbs thought it 'a work of some power, uncertainly directed.' Only *The Times* came out decidedly against ('This first play has passages of good violent writing, but its total gesture is altogether inadequate'), in which opinion it found support only in the *Daily Mirror* ('An angry play by an angry young author . . . neurotic, exaggerated and more than slightly distasteful') and *The Birmingham Post* ('We shall be very frank about this. If more plays like tonight's *Look Back in Anger* are produced, the "Writer's Theatre" at the Royal Court must surely sink. I look back in anger upon a night misconceived and misspent.').

Then came Sunday, with a generally favourable review from



1. John Osborne

Harold Hobson in *The Sunday Times* and Kenneth Tynan's great outburst of enthusiasm in *The Observer* which ended: 'I agree that *Look Back in Anger* is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters, however, is the size of the minority. I estimate it at roughly 6,733,000, which is the number of people in this country between twenty and thirty. . . . I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*. It is the best young play of its decade.'

But if most of the critics felt in a vague way that perhaps some sort of revolution might have been set in motion by *Look Back in Anger*, the public was not at first with them. Not that the English Stage Company did not have the average theatregoer's good wishes; its declared aims of being primarily a writer's theatre where new dramatists and new drama could obtain a hearing were sympathetic, and it had made a sound if unsensational start with Angus Wilson's *The Mulberry Bush* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*; *Look Back in Anger* was the third play in their first repertory season, to be followed almost at once by Ronald Duncan's *Don Juan* and *The Death of Satan* in a double bill and, a little later, by Nigel Dennis's *Cards of Identity*. So far, so good: two first plays by novelists in their forties, one distinguished import, one play by an established name in verse drama, and one by a young actor in his twenties. These played turn and turn about until early autumn, when *Look Back in Anger* was allowed, more as an act of faith than anything else, to run continuously for some ten weeks until the advent of the theatre's first 'star attraction', Brecht's *Good Woman of Setzuan* with Peggy Ashcroft. By the time this latter had ended its run (which coincided disastrously with the Hungarian revolution) the company was £13,000 in the red, and only a classical revival, Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, with Joan Plowright and Laurence Harvey, put on as a Christmas attraction, pulled them out of their difficulties by turning the deficit into a £10,000 profit. By now the tide had turned: there was time for another profitable revival of *Look Back in Anger*, and *The Entertainer* was already on the horizon, with a firm undertaking from Sir Laurence Olivier to play the lead. The Royal Court as a home for the new drama was secure.

Before we go on to consider how this came about, however, we should go back to explain how the English Stage Company came into existence in the first place. Basically, it was through the happy conjunction of two groups working hopefully towards the same ends. The initial idea of a dramatic company which would in some measure offer a counterpart to the English Opera Group came to Lord Harewood and the poet Ronald Duncan as a result of some work they did together in connexion with the Devon Festival. The plans went through various stages – at one time they envisaged merely a series of Sunday-evening performances along the lines of those given by the Repertory Players – but with the addition of the businessman Neville Blond as in some measure financial guarantor of the group it became clear that it would all have to be organized on a much more professional basis, preferably with a permanent company and a theatre of its own. Casting round for a practical man of the theatre ready to take on such a venture, the planners hit upon George Devine – largely on the suggestion of Oscar Lewenstein, who was at that time managing one of the theatres under consideration, the Royal Court. George Devine had, in fact, been trying, with a young television director called Tony Richardson, to set up precisely such an organization for the last two or three years, first on his own, then with the backing of the Stratford Memorial Theatre, envisaging it as a London branch of that company. Both phases of the negotiations had centred on the Royal Court, but finally the price asked was too high and the owner, who had been losing money on the theatre for some time, lost interest in the deal when the theatre suddenly took on a success, the revue *Airs on a Shoestring*.

When Devine was approached with the plans for the new company, he agreed in principle to take it over, provided only that a permanent home could be found for it. The owner of the Royal Court at that time owned the derelict Kingsway Theatre (since demolished), and suggested that the company should acquire and recondition it, which at first they planned to do. A credit squeeze put an end to that idea, however, and since the Royal Court had meanwhile run into a succession of misfortunes, the owner proved willing in the end to meet the company's

terms. So the English Stage Company was officially formed, a lease of thirty-four years taken on the Royal Court, and things started moving. Devine's first idea was that there must be many writers in their forties or thereabouts who would be delighted to write for the theatre if not put off by the prospect of having to battle with commercial managements to keep their plays intact. Here, with the solitary exceptions of Angus Wilson, whose play had in any case already been done at Bristol, and Nigel Dennis, who jumped at the chance of adapting his own novel *Cards of Identity* to the stage, he was disappointed. He was disappointed, too, by the meagre response to an advertisement in *The Stage* for new plays: only one play of any interest arrived on his doormat. But that was *Look Back in Anger*.

In the launching, accidentally or by design, of any new movement, timing is all-important, and there is no doubt that *Look Back in Anger* arrived at just the right moment, even if the public were a little slow to appreciate the fact. As it happens, *Look Back in Anger* is the earliest example of a process which has frequently been crucial in the progress of the new drama: the mediation of television between the playwright and his public. Despite notices that suggested that something exciting was afoot, *Look Back in Anger* had not done notably better than its fellows in the first repertory season; when it took over by itself it coasted along for the first eight weeks just below the takings at which it would break even. Then at the beginning of the ninth week, an extract was shown on television, and takings jumped at once from about £950 for the week to over £1,300, and in the next week to over £1,700, the progress being cut short only by a previous commitment to open the ill-fated *Good Woman of Setzuan*. The time, obviously, was ripe: 1956 was the year of Suez and Hungary, protest was in the air, and the mood of the country, especially that of young England, veered sharply from the preciousness and dilettantism which had been in vogue at the universities and elsewhere for the last few years to one of grim political consciousness. In *Look Back in Anger* and Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* (published a couple of months later) as well as in the extrovert, disenchanted novels of John Wain and Kingsley Amis, the under-forties, as well as many of the under-

thirties, found a rallying-point, though as subsequent events demonstrated this era, in the theatre at least, was to prove short-lived; when the next bunch of dramatists came forward they turned out not to be playwrights of protest at all, but meticulous explorers of a multitude of private worlds, and for a follow-up to Osborne and Anger the Royal Court could only find a feeble commercial imitation, Willis Hall's *The Long and the Short and the Tall*.

Fortunately, however, they did not have to rely on the genre, nor was it ever their intention to do so. The essence of a writer's theatre, after all, is that it should be open to all sorts of writers, not just one sort. The Royal Court has been accused of many sorts of bias in its time (most persistently of left-wing bias, though exactly where one is to find good right-wing playwrights these days the critics conveniently omit to say), but what strikes one most forcibly on looking through a list of productions is the remarkable catholicity of their choice. The range of their foreign productions is extraordinary; in the normal course of public performances at the Royal Court they have given British premières to, among others, Carson McCullers's *Member of the Wedding*, Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*, Beckett's *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, Ionesco's *The Chairs* and *Rhinoceros*, Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending*, Sartre's *Nekrassov* and *Altona*, and Genet's *The Blacks*. They have also staged memorable revivals of *Lysistrata*, *Major Barbara*, *Rosmersholm*, Chekhov's *Platonov* (previously unproduced in this country) and *The Changeling*. But also they have produced some work by almost every new British writer of any note, taking over other company's productions of plays by Pinter, Wesker, and Delaney, as well as bringing forward on their own account at least three figures of major interest apart from Osborne: Ann Jellicoe, N. F. Simpson, and John Arden. And each of these four principal 'Royal Court dramatists' is entirely individual and different from the rest; no simple category can be devised to embrace them all, and there is certainly no question of a clear, consistent Royal Court 'line' – the only visible criterion being applied is that each writer should produce work effective and valuable in its own terms.

The ways that the Royal Court's writers have been acquired vary considerably. Ann Jellicoe and N. F. Simpson were chosen from among the prize-winners in the 1956 *Observer* play competition (the prize carried, finally, no guarantee of production, and these two third-prize winners were selected as the most interesting, though subsequently, owing to an unexpected postponement of *The Long and the Short and the Tall*, place was found also at the Royal Court for the first-prize winner, the West Indian Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*). Arnold Wesker was introduced by Lindsay Anderson, who met him on a film course. John Arden attracted the attention of Oscar Lewenstein with a radio play. Writers from other fields, among them Keith Johnstone, Doris Lessing, and Stuart Holroyd, were encouraged to try their hand at play-writing, and their works were staged, like early efforts of John Arden, Arnold Wesker, and Alun Owen, at the Sunday-night productions-without-décor which became a regular feature of the Royal Court programmes, giving authors the chance to see their work actually performed and the management the chance to assess their chances in performance as well as try out new actors and directors on them.

What, finally, has the place of the English Stage Company been in the revival of British drama? Indirectly it has had a considerable influence by helping to make available to British writers and theatregoers the latest and most interesting works from abroad, though its work in this field does not seem to have been systematic; it has also helped writers to meet and exchange ideas in its young writers' group and simply by virtue of their all working in the same theatre. Directly it has brought forward several dramatists of unusual interest, and it is greatly to the company's credit that, having hit by a happy chance on a successful writer, Osborne, and potentially a successful formula, *Protest*, it did not stick there, but went on to use the profits accumulated from *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer* (including the company's share in film rights, foreign rights, etc., some £50,000 in five years, as compared with £30,000 from the Arts Council in the same period) to put on plays of much less commercial appeal, such as those of Arden, Ann Jellicoe, and the earlier works of Simpson, all of which have incurred

sizeable (and predictable) losses. In fact, apart from these two Osborne plays, only about six plays in the whole history of the company have actually made a profit – *The Country Wife*, *Rosmersholm*, *Roots*, *Rhinoceros*, *Luther*, and *The Kitchen* – and only about as many more have sustained minimal losses. The record is striking, if not in practical terms very encouraging, and the feeling seems to be abroad in the company that the thrill is gone, exciting new plays are not coming in (though plays, of a sort, arrive at the rate of a thousand a year) and, as George Devine himself puts it, it is time for the whole thing to be rethought from a safe distance.

The lead in the new drama certainly has passed elsewhere, and indeed did so almost at once, first to Stratford, E., then to the provinces (though in the case of Wesker, with the Royal Court's active encouragement), then to television. But the respect in which the Royal Court is held, and the almost unflinching distinction of its work, in whatever field, remain unchallenged. Moreover, its disciples are there to spread the word; actors, directors, designers, most of the distinguished young in all departments, have gone through the workshop of the Royal Court before striking out on their own, and the most successful and prestigious British film company today, Woodfall, which has been responsible for the films of *Look Back in Anger*, *The Entertainer*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and *A Taste of Honey*, is the creation of two alumni, Tony Richardson and John Osborne. Obviously the success, artistic and even, overall, commercial, of the English Stage Company has been largely a matter of the luck involved in the right people happening to be in the right place at the right time, but then without the skill and intelligence of the people, especially George Devine, to exploit the place and the time the new drama might never have emerged, or only in bits and pieces on and off for the next twenty years instead of all in a bang over a mere five. For this, at least, we must be grateful to them.

JOHN OSBORNE

TO JOHN OSBORNE BELONGS the praise (or the blame) of starting it all off: after a slightly shaky start *Look Back in Anger* became the first decisive success in the career of the English Stage Company and established the Royal Court as the London home of young drama. Although the lead in these matters has passed elsewhere in later years, and 'the Osborne generation' proved only the first of several waves, 8 May 1956 marks the real break-through of 'the new drama' into the British theatre, and Osborne himself remains, one way and another, one of its most influential exponents, as well as representing for the general public the new dramatist *par excellence*, the first of the angry young men and arguably the biggest shock to the system of British theatre since the advent of Shaw. And this in spite of the inevitable difficulties of following up a sensational début with something which guarantees that the first sensation was not merely a freak success or the one work of a one-work writer.

Though *Look Back in Anger* was the first of Osborne's plays to reach the London stage, it was not by any means his first written; he admits to 'several' works unpublished and unperformed as well as *Epitaph for George Dillon*, written in collaboration with Anthony Creighton, which came earlier but was performed later, and an early piece which contributed some material to *The World of Paul Slickey*. He had also already had two plays performed out of town, *The Devil Inside Him* in Huddersfield in 1950 and *Personal Enemy* in Harrogate in 1955. The first, written in collaboration with Stella Linden, was a strange melodrama about a Welsh youth whom the villagers think an idiot and his relations a sex-maniac because he writes poetry; his talents are recognized by a visiting medical student, but meanwhile he is constrained to kill a local girl who attacks his idea of beauty by attempting to pass him off as the father of her child. More characteristic was *Personal Enemy*, written with Anthony Creighton, about the reactions of a soldier's relatives and friends when he refuses to be repatriated from his captivity

in Korea. But *Look Back in Anger* it was which provided the first type-image of the new drama, and which has dogged its author ever since, so it seems inevitably the right place to start. When it was first performed Osborne was 26, an actor with some years' experience in provincial repertory, notably at Ilfracombe and Hayling Island, and familiar to regulars at the Royal Court in small parts, though he says that he never took himself seriously as an actor, and neither did anyone else.

Looking back on *Look Back in Anger*, it is a difficult but necessary exercise to try and see it through the eyes of its first audience. In the last chapter I have sketched the situation in which the play emerged, but that still does not quite explain why it had the effect it did at that time. Osborne himself has recently characterized it as 'a formal, rather old-fashioned play', and the description is not unfair, though it should, of course, be read in the light of his accompanying statement that he dare not pick up a copy of the play nowadays, as it embarrasses him. Certainly there is nothing much in the form of the piece to justify so much excitement: it is a well-made play, with all its climaxes, its tightenings and slackenings of tension in the right places, and in general layout it belongs clearly enough to the solid realistic tradition represented by, say, *The Deep Blue Sea*.

No, what distinguished it as a decisive break with Rattigan and the older drama was not so much its form as its content: the characters who took part in the drama and the language in which they expressed themselves. Though Jimmy Porter and his milieu seem, even at this short distance of time, as inescapably 'period' as the characters in *The Vortex*, quintessentially 'mid-fifties', it was precisely the quality of immediacy and topicality which makes them so now that had the electrifying effect in 1956: Jimmy was taken to be speaking for a whole generation, of which he and his creator were among the most precocious representatives, since it was essentially the post-war generation they represented, those who had, like Lindsay Anderson, 'nailed a red flag to the roof of the mess at the fort of Annan Parbat' to celebrate the return of a Labour government in 1945 and then gradually became disillusioned when a brave new world failed to materialize. Most of the people who felt this way were inevit-

ably in their middle to late thirties in 1956, but with Osborne as a figurehead they were all cheerfully labelled 'angry young man' and Jimmy Porter was linked in a rather improbable twosome with Amis's Lucky Jim as the cult-figure of the younger generation.

The main usefulness of Jimmy Porter in this guise is that he is the stuff of which perennial rebels are made; though it is more difficult now than it was five years ago to see him as heroic, there is no denying the truth of the picture as a permanent human type – the self-flagellating solitary in self-inflicted exile from the world, drawing strength from his own weakness and joy from his own misery. He is, we gradually learn, a university graduate and an enormous cultural snob (only the safe classics and the most traditional jazz, only good books and 'posh' Sunday papers), but he lives in a tumbledown attic flat in a drab Midland town and makes his living by keeping a sweet stall in the market. Everything in his life dissatisfies him, and the tone of his conversation (which is mainly monologue anyway) is consistently one of railing and complaint. The principal sufferer from all this is his wife Alison, whom he cannot forgive for her upper-middle-class background and whom he constantly torments in order to extract some reaction from her, to bring her to her knees, while she, having discovered that her only defence is imperturbability, refuses as long as she can to react. And so they rend each other, under the sympathetic eye of Cliff, the helpless *tertium quid* in this strange *ménage à trois*, until a fourth, Alison's actress friend Helena, arrives. Helena, with her air of being 'the gracious representative of visiting royalty', soon makes the situation intolerable by her very presence, and packs off Alison, who is expecting a baby and has not told Jimmy, to her home and family before herself falling into Jimmy's arms at the end of the second act.

In the third act Jimmy turns out to be settled fairly happily with Helena, as far as he can be happy with anyone – partly, it seems, because she stands up to him rather more (like most bullies in sexual situations, Jimmy appears basically just to want bullying back) and partly because he is bound to her by nothing more complicated than lust. When Cliff announces that he thinks

he should leave, Jimmy more or less admits these two possibilities in the play's most familiar pronouncement:

It's a funny thing. You've been loyal, generous and a good friend. But I'm quite prepared to see you wander off, find a new home, and make out on your own. All because of something I want from that girl downstairs, something I know in my heart she's incapable of giving. You're worth half a dozen Helenas to me or to anyone. And, if you were in my place, you'd do the same thing. . . . Why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death? Have you ever had a letter, and on it is franked 'Please Give Your Blood Generously'? Well, the Postmaster-General does that, on behalf of all the women in the world. I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and forties, when we were still kids. There aren't any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New Nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus. No, there's nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women.

It is not, however, Helena who finally reduces him, but Alison, returned after losing her baby. When Helena wants to extract herself from the painful situation Jimmy dismisses her with:

It's no good trying to fool yourself about love. You can't fall into it like a soft job, without dirtying up your hands. It takes muscle and guts. And if you can't bear the thought of messing up your nice, clean soul, you'd better give up the whole idea of life, and become a saint. Because you'll never make it as a human being. It's either this world or the next.

Then he rounds on Alison:

Was I really wrong to believe that there's a – a kind of – burning virility of mind and spirit that looks for something as powerful as itself? The heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be the loneliest, like the old bear, following his own breath in the dark forest. There's no warm pack, no herd to comfort him. That voice that cries out doesn't *have* to be a weakling's, does it?

But she for once has an answer:

I was wrong, I was wrong! I don't want to be neutral, I don't want to be a saint. I want to be a lost cause. I want to be corrupt and futile!

Don't you understand? It's gone! It's gone! That – that helpless human being inside my body. I thought it was so safe, and secure in there. Nothing could take it from me. It was mine, my responsibility. But it's lost. All I wanted was to die. I never knew what it was like. I didn't know it could be like that! I was in pain, and all I could think of was you, and what I'd lost. I thought: if only – if only he could see me now, so stupid, and ugly and ridiculous. This is what he's been longing for me to feel. This is what he wants to splash about in! I'm in the fire, and I'm burning, and all I want is to die! It's cost him his child, and any others I might have had! But what does it matter – this is what he wanted from me! Don't you see! I'm in the mud at last! I'm grovelling! I'm crawling! Oh, God –

Faced at last with a really effective example of his own handiwork, Jimmy quails, and at the last he and Alison are united again in their idyllic dream world of bears and squirrels, content, perhaps, never to make it as human beings in the real world around them.

One of the most fascinating things about *Look Back in Anger* is the divergence between Osborne's conscious intentions, as conveyed in his comments and stage directions in the printed text, and what actually emerges in performance. This applies particularly, of course, to the character of Jimmy, and indeed it is arguable that the force and intensity of the play derive mainly from the author's shifting, ambivalent love-hate relationship with his hero. In the stage directions criticism direct or implied abounds. For example, at the beginning Jimmy is described as 'a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike. Blistering honesty, or apparent honesty, like his, makes few friends. To many he seems sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loudmouth. To be as vehement as he is is to be almost non-committal.'

That does not sound particularly heroic, and the impression is fostered by the running commentary of stage directions throughout: 'Jimmy is rather shakily triumphant. He cannot allow himself to look at either of them to catch their response to his rhetoric . . .'; 'He's been cheated of his response, but he's got to draw blood somehow'; 'Jimmy watches her, waiting for her

to break'; 'Jimmy enters . . . he is almost giddy with anger, and has to steady himself on the chair . . .' There are constant indications of his neurotic determination to establish and keep his supremacy in any situation, inventing trouble if there is none lying around in order to do so, his hysterical persecution of Alison, his childish petulance. Indeed, the image which constantly emerges is that of the spoilt, difficult child, convinced that any world not run entirely for his convenience must of necessity be out of joint, and in need of nothing more than a good slapping down (which would square with the theory that his misfortune sexually is that he has coupled with a doormat when what he really longs for is a strict disciplinarian nanny-substitute).

And yet somehow this is not quite what comes over in the play on stage. For one thing it is called *Look Back in Anger*, not *Look Back in Petulance*, and all the most familiar interpreters of Jimmy (Kenneth Haigh, Richard Pasco, Richard Burton) have been stocky, substantial, heroic figures rather than the weedy neurotics one might fairly cast in the role. For another, Osborne has, consciously or unconsciously, provided a complete cover for the heroic interpretation: what by the less ideal view would be merely excuses (everyone is out of step but our Jimmy) become if one looks at it from the other point of view genuine reasons: there are no great causes left, the world is all wrong, and it need not be just the weakling who cries out against it; Jimmy is the saintlike witness to right values in a world gone wrong, the mouthpiece of protest for a dissatisfied generation. And finally, what really makes this interpretation stick in the playgoer's mind is the burning rhetoric of his great tirades: even if their motivation is to be found in petty personal disputes and minor skirmishes in the battle of the sexes, once Jimmy gets going they generate their own force and conviction; those around him put up with him and listen entranced instead of briskly telling him to shut up and not be so silly, and his very real personal dynamism and magnetism come over to the audience as they do to the other characters on the stage. The only mystery is, Why should someone so forceful remain so impotent? And there we come back at once to the answer he himself provides: it is the deficiencies of the modern world which have made him so.

Look Back in Anger is demonstrably a muddled play – muddled, that is, in what it has to say and the way it says it – but this naturally is only a very minor consideration: a play is about people, not necessarily about ideas, and what matters is not that Jimmy is a mass of contradictions (most of us are), but that Osborne has managed to make them into a convincing dramatic representation of a complex human being, and one who offered a rallying-point for a number of people from the post-war generation who felt that the world of today was not treating them according to their deserts. It may be argued, though, that Osborne achieved this partly at the expense of his other characters: to build up Jimmy he has had to a certain extent to scale down the rest, and paradoxically (or perhaps it is not so paradoxical, as we shall see) the only other person in the play who measures up to him in solidity and conviction is Alison's father, the Colonel – partly, no doubt, because he is the only one we never see with Jimmy and subjected to Jimmy's normal barrage.

It is, however, a general trait in Osborne's work that he tends to sympathize with his hero in his writing to such an extent that the other characters are made to capitulate to him almost without a struggle and the scope of genuine dramatic conflict is thereby reduced. The remarkable thing about *Epitaph for George Dillon*, the only earlier work we know in anything like its original form, is that this is not entirely so, since though it has an angry young hero, not only is he given an adversary worthy of him, but in the end doubt is more decisively cast on his probity and worth than is ever permitted in *Look Back in Anger* (despite the stage direction referring to Jimmy's 'apparent honesty'). This may, for all we know, be the influence of Osborne's collaborator on this play, Anthony Creighton (who later collaborated with Bernard Miller on an unusually compelling piece of psychological nonsense about a dominant woman, *Tomorrow with Pictures*): certainly the character of Ruth, though somehow never quite of a piece with the rest of the play (how, one finds oneself asking, could she possibly have sprung from the background attributed to her?), is in her own terms decidedly well drawn, and the head-on collision between them in the second act, when each digs too close to the other's soft centre for comfort

and harsh truths emerge on both sides, generates a sort of excitement not found elsewhere in Osborne's work. That has its excitements, too, of course, but they are the excitements of the monologue and the tirade, the solitary orator and his captivated audience, not those engendered by the clash of two equally powerful personalities on one small stage.

George, the central character of the play, is an actor and writer; he is sponging off the Elliotts, an easygoing, simple family living just outside London, and though the father does not care for him he is adept at getting his own way with the mother, whom he reminds of her dead son, and Josie, the hard, stupid daughter. Professionally he is a failure, or, as he prefers to put it, he is waiting for success; he is a recognizable Osborne hero, restless and dissatisfied – a rebel who knows what he is against without being very clear what he is for. He pities himself, situated in a hostile and uncomprehending world, but unlike Jimmy Porter he has, every now and then, enough penetration to doubt whether he is worth pity; is he a real artist deserving of sympathy in the torments an artist conventionally undergoes, or is he just a confidence trickster who usually tricks himself as well? In Ruth, Mrs Elliott's left-wing intellectual sister, he finds someone oddly like himself in certain respects; an ex-Communist who has just broken with the party after seventeen years, soon after casting off her lover of six years because she discovered their relationship was built on cheap lies, she is uncertain of herself, uncertain of her value to herself or others, dissatisfied with her position, but not ready to make a change.

In their great confrontation, which might be a love scene but somehow does not turn out that way, they strip each other bare of comfortable pretences, and George comes to admit openly and even sincerely (as far as anything he says is not part of his incessant self-dramatizing) that he may be living on an illusion, that he may not have talent after all – 'But do you know what is worse? Far, far worse? . . . Having the same symptoms as talent, the pain, the ugly swellings, the lot – but never knowing whether or not the diagnosis is correct. Do you think there may be some kind of euthanasia for that? Could you kill it by burying yourself here – for good?' Whether or not this is possible, in

the last act he sets out to do it: he rewrites his play so that it rakes in money on tour in the provinces as an adults-only shocker, recites his own epitaph to Ruth (who does not even hear it out) to mark his own spiritual death, and at the end of the play seems all set to marry Josie as soon as he has divorced his wife and live an ordinary suburban life, trying to kill the spark inside him which he can never for a moment confidently accept as the real thing.

The fact that *Epitaph for George Dillon* was staged after *Look Back in Anger*, and also that its balance, its ability to see round the central character and offer him some genuine competition without sacrificing any of the passionate rhetorical drive in the dialogue, make it still the most wholly satisfactory of the plays Osborne has worked on, tended at first to obscure the lines of Osborne's development. But not for long, and Osborne, never at a loss for words to explain himself, was not slow to tell us why his style was changing: it was the first impact of Brecht on his consciousness which made him see the light and begin to find the limitations of realism (against which he was already chafing in *Look Back in Anger*) too impossibly restricting. In *The Entertainer*, his next play, the influence of Brecht is very marked in a number of incidentals, though one would guess that, at that time at least, he had not fully grasped what the epic theatre was about (the totally misconceived film version, scripted by Osborne himself, which tries to transplant all the least realistic sections unchanged into a setting of documentary realism, would tend to support such an opinion).

In effect, the structure of the play presents a series of realistic scenes – more realistic, perhaps, than anything in *Look Back in Anger* – dropped quite arbitrarily into an 'enddistancing' epic framework. On the realistic level we have the story of Archie Rice, a corny, fading comedian playing in a holiday show called *Rock'n Roll New'd Look* at a large seaside town. He is, we gradually learn, a hollow man, unable to make real contact with anyone – his father Billy, whom he loves but who maddens him, his wife, whom he pities, or his children, two of whom we meet, the shy, easygoing Frank and Jean, who is intense and rather priggishly left-wing. He uses his comic persona to ward off anyone

who may want to look him straight in the face and, cornered as he is, he can be completely unscrupulous – he sets up an affair with a young girl so that her parents will put up the money for his new show, and when that fails because Billy goes and tells them that he is married with three grown-up children he allows his father to return to the stage to recoup the family fortunes (Billy is one of the few survivors from the great days of music-hall). His son Mick, fighting at Suez, is killed, and for a moment it touches him, but only for a moment; he is dead almost beyond rousing – the portrait, perhaps of Jimmy Porter twenty years later, or George Dillon in ten years, when the effect of their capitulation is complete and visible.

Encasing these scenes is a framework of supposed music-hall numbers, performed mostly by Archie, which make an oblique but unmistakable comment on the main action, their burden being that the world is rotten, riddled with apathy, and the theatre, as we see it and as it is summed up in the person of Archie, is the symbol of this state of decay: audience and actors are equally inert. As Archie puts it drunkenly to Jean just before the news of Mick's death arrives:

You see this face, you see this face, this face can split open with warmth and humanity. It can sing, and tell the worst, unfunniest stories in the world to a great mob of dead, drab erks and it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because – look at my eyes. I'm dead behind these eyes. I'm dead, just like the whole inert, shoddy lot out there. It doesn't matter because I don't feel a thing, and neither do they. We're just as dead as each other.

'Anger' is, in fact, again the keynote of Osborne's comment on the modern world (the label of the 'angry young man', now fortunately almost dropped from currency but in its time much overused, still has that grain of truth in it) – Jimmy's statement that there are no good causes left to die for finds its exact visual parallel and commentary, for instance, in the staging of Archie's song 'Thank God I'm Normal', with its pseudo-patriotic verse ('if we all stand By this dear old land The battle will be won') illustrated by a blowsy nude Britannia wearing only a helmet. But, of course, if the modern world is to be castigated it must be



2a. 'Look Back in Anger': b. 'Live Like Pigs'





3a. 'One Way Pendulum'

b. 'The Hole'



by comparison with something else, some other era, and here we come straight to the central contradiction in Osborne's work: what is looked back on with nostalgia is precisely the era of Edwardian settlement and complacency which in other contexts would be looked back on with the fiercest anger. We noted in *Look Back in Anger* the surprising fact that the only other character apart from Jimmy who is allowed his say and some measure of genuinely independent existence is Alison's father, towards whom Jimmy's own reactions are ambiguous: Alison says that she thinks in spite of everything Jimmy rather likes him, though he is obviously in many ways the representative of everything Jimmy is against. And the reason for this is clear enough, on a moment's consideration: at least in their heyday Alison's father's generation knew where they were, what standards their lives were ruled by and where their duty lay (or so, at least, it now seems); they had causes to die for and even if they were wrong they had a certain dignity. Their security in an apparently secure world is eminently to be envied by someone, like Jimmy, who finds no certainty anywhere, outside himself or within.

Similarly in *The Entertainer* there is at least one point of reference in a sympathetic member of the older generation, Billy Rice. With Archie, as with George Dillon, we can never be sure how far he is really a victim of the world around him and how far he is the creator of his own situation: basically, it seems, he never was talented and he could never have done much better than he is doing now, catering for the decadent tastes of modern audiences (and not, apparently, doing that very well, since even on this level he fails to bring them in); his one moment of realization, when he heard a Negro woman singing in a way which told him, for the moment, that 'it didn't matter how much you kick people, the real people, how much you despise them, if they can stand up and make a pure, just natural noise like that, there's nothing wrong with them, only with everybody else', has served merely as a painful reminder, a glimpse of a lost Eden he could never attain and to which no one holds the key any more ('I don't suppose we'll ever hear it again. There's nobody who can feel like that'). But Billy was great, and is great still, a

survivor from the heroic past of popular entertainment's heyday in the Edwardian music-hall, now gone for ever.

In his note to the printed text Osborne says: 'The music-hall is dying, and, with it, a significant part of England. Some of the heart of England has gone: something that once belonged to everyone, for this was truly a folk art.' Significantly, Osborne is here writing of something, like the Edwardian splendours of India, which he cannot possibly remember himself and which becomes therefore, for him, a romantic legend to be longed for as an alternative to the indecisions and false values of modern life. The intelligent political man of left-wing sympathies in Osborne tells him – and us – that it was the faults in this antediluvian world which brought our world into existence, but the incorrigible romantic looks back admiringly, and these plays are the battlegrounds (hence much of their excitement) on which the two Osbornes fight it out.

More sympathetic elders occur in Osborne's next work, *The World of Paul Slickey*, where, in fact, they are almost the only people towards whom even a spark of sympathy is permitted. This 'Comedy of Manners with Music' is generally, and not unfairly, regarded as Osborne's most complete failure; critically and commercially it certainly was, and even allowing for an exaggeration of hostility in proportion to the exaggeration of preliminary hopes for it after *The Entertainer*, it is difficult to find anything good to say for it now. It was based, apparently, on an unproduced script from before *Look Back in Anger*, and is to date Osborne's only attempt at a genre for which he is totally ill-suited, the social satire. The liveliest passages of Osborne's plays may often involve, or appear to involve, social criticism, but if we look closer it is clear that the criticism, such as it is, is never based on a close examination of its object (hence the curious interchangeability, in different contexts, of his objects of detestation and devotion); it is all entirely subjective, a volley of grape-shot flying off in all directions in which the person who discharges it counts for much more than his nominal targets (that is to say, while some hits, most misses, but this is not vitally important to our judgement of the plays, because they are so devised that it is the force rather than the accuracy of the

attack which counts for most). But satire calls above all for a degree of objectivity, if only so that the satirist can size up his object's weak points and aim directly at them; the blunderbuss of open anger must be replaced by the pearl-handled automatic of considered irony. But this is the last thing we would expect from Osborne: in *The World of Paul Slickey* anything and everything comes under the same erratic fire, mountains and mole-hills are greeted with equal fury, and by the time we are through savaging the church, the aristocracy, the gutter Press, those masculine women and feminine men (as well as their more bigoted opponents), the success ethos, the tawdriness of teenage tastes in music, the sentimentality of the woman's magazine, supporters of blood sports and corporal punishment, anti-semites, anti-Negroes and anti-anti-H-Bomb demonstrators, and just about every other imaginable *bête noire* of the discontented intellectual, we are tempted to turn Osborne's own words against him: 'To be as vehement as he is is to be almost non-committal.'

And, in fact, about one or two of his central targets Osborne is ultimately curiously non-committal. 'Paul Slickey' himself, the gossip-columnist hero-villain who personifies the workings of the bitch-goddess success, proves to be dishearteningly soft-centred: he does not really like his job, he has moments of doubt and depression, he sees himself already as much more the victim of the machine than its manipulator; in a word, he is sentimentalized and the blame for him and his like put on an undefined 'them' who have forced him into the rat-race. Similarly Father Evilgreene, the sinister priest with his parody ritual (seldom, incidentally, can satire have been quite so heavy-handed and basically innocuous) turns out after all the to-do not to be a real priest at all, so that what we may have thought daringly directed against religion turns out simply (and safely) to be directed at imitation religion. And, as we have already remarked, the two embodiments of the privileged, aristocratic tradition which seems to be intended as one of the play's main targets, Lord and Lady Mortlake, turn out in fact to be the most amiable and sympathetic of all the characters, figures of sense and dignity who have strangely survived into a mad and frenzied world (what ingrained conservative could present the situation more acceptably?).

As the plot (which is reduced to a minimum anyway) progresses all these characters are introduced against the background of a surprisingly well-kept stately home, owned by Jack Oakham's ('Paul Slickey's', that is) father-in-law Lord Mortlake; Lord Mortlake does not know that Oakham is Slickey, hence one slight line of plot, but most of the story concerns the complicated pattern of adultery woven by Jack, his wife Lesley, his sister-in-law Deirdre Rawley and her husband Michael, with the aid of Gillian Giltedge-Whyte, a debutante, Terry Maroon, a rock'n'roller, and Jo, Paul Slickey's secretary, and leading to the conclusion that the only escape from marital boredom is a change of sex. There are fourteen songs, confirming what we had already gathered from *The Entertainer*, that lyric-writing is not Osborne's forte: they include 'Bring Back the Axe', 'The Mechanics of Success', 'The Income Tax Man' and 'I Want to Hear About Beautiful Things', the titles of which are all sufficiently self-explanatory.

Considerably more interesting, though treated to a reception almost equally disastrous, is Osborne's first (and to judge from his subsequent comments on the matter his last) television play, *A Subject of Scandal and Concern*. The history of this was long and involved, and it was offered round a number of the independent companies before being finally accepted by the B.B.C., who agreed to perform it as written, while the other companies had required rewriting and adaptation. The reason for their worries about it became clear when the play was performed and published, for, in fact, it turns out to be not so much a play as an illustrated lecture – an effect which the B.B.C. production intensified by substituting for the costumed narrator of the printed text, placed physically in the prison setting in which much of the drama takes place, an extra-smooth John Freeman playing the television uncle for us against an anonymous studio background. The story that the narrator has to tell is interesting enough: the prosecution of George Holyoake, the last man to be imprisoned for blasphemy in this country. Holyoake was a socialist lecturer who was put on trial in 1842 for saying, in response to a question at a public meeting, that he did not believe in God. In the play we see a little of his relationship with his wife, a careful recon-

struction of his trial, in which he conducted his own defence despite a speech impediment and an almost total ignorance of the law, and his later experiences in prison, where he remains enigmatically impassive despite the news of his friend's recantation before death, his wife's reproaches over his daughter's death, and the fervent exhortations of the chaplain; he ends, as he began, very much a man of mystery, rising to eloquence only at his trial, when for the moment he loses his impediment in defence of his own convictions.

All this is handled in a straightforward, not particularly imaginative fashion, but the meat of the play comes mainly in the narration. The Narrator is always there at the viewer's elbow, telling him what has just happened and explaining what is about to happen, drawing the moral or pointing out sententiously that no simple moral can be drawn. This is 'endistance-ment' with a vengeance, since any attempt on the part of the play to stand on its own feet is immediately stamped on by a prompt return to the lecture-room, and while this may prevent one from becoming improperly involved in the action it runs the severe risk of preventing one also from becoming even properly interested in it. Again, one suspects Osborne's Brechtian enthusiasms have contributed to the method employed, but the Narrator's introduction (modified slightly in the version acted) reads like a parody of Brecht's ideas, with a hint of disdain for the audience very personal to Osborne thrown in for good measure:

Good evening. I am a lawyer. My name is not important as I am not directly involved in what you are about to see. What I am introducing for you is an entertainment. There is no reason why you should not go on with what you are doing. What you are about to see is a straightforward account of an obscure event in the history of your – well, my – country. I shall simply fill in with incidental but necessary information, like one of your own television chairmen, in fact. You will not really be troubled with anything unfamiliar. . . .

Similarly with his readings from *The Cheltenham Chronicle* of the day about the part of the meeting we have just witnessed, his imparting of the information that 'Mr Holyoake had finished, his voice notably stronger and his impediment astonishingly

improved' when we have just seen and heard this very event, and his pretentiously throwaway conclusion (slightly shortened in performance):

This is a time when people demand from entertainments what they call a 'solution'. They expect to have their little solution rattling away down there in the centre of the play like a motto in a Christmas cracker. For those who seek information, it has been put before you. If it is meaning you are looking for, then you must start collecting for yourself. And what would you say is the moral then? If you are waiting for the commercial it is probably this: you cannot live by bread alone. You must have jam – even if it is mixed with another man's blood. That's all. You may retire now. And if a mini-car is your particular mini-dream, then dream it. When your turn comes you will be called. Good night.

(Note, incidentally, the decay of Osborne's earlier angry eloquence into a merely mannered abruptness of delivery applied to words which are more than ever gesture without real meaning.)

What Osborne is after in this use of narration seems clear enough, but the weakness of *A Matter of Scandal and Concern* is still the same as that of *The Entertainer*: that his adoption of Brechtian processes is only half-hearted. What happens in both of them is that the framework of comment – the music-hall songs, the narration – is in one convention and the scenes contained by that framework are in another: the same *verismo* as *Look Back in Anger*. This persistent failure to evolve an integrated new dramatic technique to replace the old lent a particular interest to the appearance of his second historical play, *Luther*; would he in this, tackling for the first time a theme right away from contemporary realism in the medium in which he was most at home, the stage, manage at last to find a satisfactory new form for his work?

The answer is still yes and no, but the reasons for this evasion are unexpected. First it must be said that the play as a whole corresponds very closely in dramatic method to the reconstructed scenes in *A Matter of Scandal and Concern*: the historical material is straightforwardly presented on the whole, with Luther's own words used whenever possible (as Osborne and his supporters rapidly pointed out to the tender-minded who

quailed at the dramatist's apparent obsession with constipation and defecation). Moreover, it is not 'Brechtian' in the senses conventional to the English theatre, being neither dressed up with songs and dances *à la* Theatre Workshop nor equipped with a ubiquitous audience-representative in the shape of a Common Man (as favoured by such examples of Brecht tamed and commercialized as *A Man for All Seasons*): 'narration', in fact, is reduced to a brusque announcement from the stage of time and place. Here the model seems to be rather the direct chronicle of *Galileo*, in which man as an individual and man in society are held as far as the spectator's interest is concerned in an edgy balance. Brecht manages to preserve the balance very effectively between the inner forces which drive Galileo on and the social forces (Church and State) which hold him back. In Osborne the balance is less satisfactory, since so much time is spent on the 'psychological' material early on – Martin's obsession with his own sinfulness, with the sinfulness of merely being alive, and his relations with his father, whom he loved, and his mother, who beat him – that by the time this all bears fruit in his rebellion and heresy, and he moves out (like Galileo) into the world of repressive social forces (emanating, like those that opposed Galileo, from the Vatican), there is not enough room left to deal with them properly.

From Act II, Scene IV, at the end of which Luther nails his theses to the church door at Wittenburg, the issues involved are scurried over in unseemly haste, with a rather feeble scene of disputation between Luther and Cajetan, the papal legate (which again demonstrates Osborne's deficiencies when a conflict of equals rather than a tirade to a captive audience is called for, since, though apparently engaging in a discussion, Luther and Cajetan never really interlock so that one answers the other; their 'dialogue' turns out, in fact, to be two monologues skilfully intercut), and another, even weaker, showing Pope Leo about to go hunting, to take care insufficiently of the theological side before we get to the Diet of Worms. Then we jump four years to learn something, but not to the uninitiated enough, about the intervening period of war and Luther's apparent betrayal of the peasants, but what happened and why remains obscure (even

though the scene with the Knight, not in the original text, was inserted to clarify matters), and the closing scene, in which we see Luther at home two years later with his wife and son, returns unashamedly to the personal with, finally, a note of nostalgia which should by now be familiar to us in Osborne's work: Luther, himself the instigator of a period of unrest and unsettled values, looks back to an earlier, happier day:

A little while, and you *shall* see me. Christ said that, my son. I hope that'll be the way of it again. I hope so. Let's just hope so, eh? Eh? let's just hope so.

Well, what about *Luther*? Does it really represent, as one critic opined, 'the most solid guarantee yet given of Mr John Osborne's dramatic stamina'? Alas, although after the relative failure of *The World of Paul Slickey* and *A Matter of Scandal and Concern* one had hoped that it would provide a reasonably clear answer, there is nothing for it but to hedge again. However, one or two pointers there are. It is noticeable, after the extreme thinness of the material in *The World of Paul Slickey*, that both *A Matter of Scandal and Concern* and *Luther* are historical reconstructions relying closely for their material and even for their dialogue on the documentary sources. This seems to suggest a drying-up, perhaps temporary, of Osborne's inventive faculties at least in so far as they concern the creation of new characters and plot-situations; instead he is turning to plots and characters already in existence. The failure of *The World of Paul Slickey* and *A Matter of Scandal and Concern*, followed by the popular and critical success of *Luther*, suggests also that after some fumbling he has mastered the technique of handling pre-existent material efficiently, to form a play which if not completely satisfactory in detail is at least well enough written and interesting enough in its material to provide a generally satisfactory evening's theatre.

I do not think anyone would deny that *Luther* is that – especially with the magnetic personality of Albert Finney in the title role – but it would surprise me if anyone on mature consideration can find it as intense, as eloquent, as personal, as – to bring out the key word here – as *felt* as *Epitaph for George Dillon*, *Look Back in Anger*, or *The Entertainer*. It is a good, sensible, com-

mercial piece of work, spiced with enough anger and naughty words to establish it as representative of a later generation than, say, Rattigan's *Adventure Story*, but basically it is not so different from *Adventure Story*, or for that matter *A Man for All Seasons* or Anouilh's *Becket*. It is popular, as they (the last two, at any rate) were popular, and on the whole it deserves its popularity. But the most positive new discovery about Osborne it offers us is that he is not just the primitive we feared he might be – inspired or nothing; he can turn his hand to play-writing simply as a craft and turn out something perfectly presentable. But equally, taken in conjunction with the two previous plays, it does make us wonder whether, barring any sudden unforeseen transformation, we must say good-bye to Osborne the innovator and greet instead Osborne the careful craftsman. A 'guarantee of dramatic stamina'? No doubt, but perhaps not in quite the sense intended.

N. F. SIMPSON

WHETHER ONE LIKES OR dislikes N. F. Simpson's work, it seems to me, there is very little to be said about it. It is uniquely all of a piece, all written in pretty well the same style, and all based on one principle, the *non sequitur*. This seems to link it with the Theatre of the Absurd (especially if we take *au grand sérieux* the pronouncement of the author-character in the first version of *A Resounding Tinkle* that 'The retreat from reason means precious little to anyone who has never caught up with reason in the first place; it takes a trained mind to relish a *non sequitur*'), but it also links it with such humbler native prototypes as *Itma* and *The Goon Show*, even without dragging in Lewis Carroll and the English nonsense tradition. And it is with *Itma* that Simpson's plays seem happiest; certainly compared with the works of Ionesco, who appears to have served to a certain extent as Simpson's model, they look very parochial and unresourceful.

Simpson is a schoolmaster by profession, and it is irresistible, though probably quite unfair, to suggest that this may explain a certain academic quality in his writing, a tendency to demonstrate rather than just say something, to explore every possibility of a joke and run it right into the ground by over-explicitness and rigid application of logic instead of letting it get its laugh and then go. Indeed, sometimes one suspects that Simpson is not primarily a funny writer at all, that the laugh is not intended to be the final product of his sallies, since when it comes at all it usually comes half-way through a sequence and not at the bitter end. But if he does this deliberately (not, that is, just by accident, like the comedian who outstays his welcome) and intends us to see beyond the jokes to a deeper truth embodied in them, one cannot help feeling that this truth – that the world is not logical and logic can be turned against itself to prove anything, since it all depends in human terms on a number of premises not open to question – is rather too obvious and too limited to support a complete dramatic *oeuvre*.

Born in London in 1919, Simpson (the N. F. stands for

Norman Frederick) worked in a bank for two years before the war, served in the Intelligence Corps, and took up teaching after he was demobbed. His first play, the two-act version of *A Resounding Tinkle*, shared third prize in the *Observer* play competition in 1956 with *The Sport of My Mad Mother* and Richard Beynon's *The Shifting Heart*, was produced in a revised version without décor at the Royal Court and later, shortened to one act, reappeared with another one-act play, *The Hole*, in a double bill there. It was not a great success commercially, but by December 1959, when *One Way Pendulum*, his second full-length play, was produced at the Royal Court, public taste had become sufficiently acclimatized to this sort of humour (the play is sub-titled 'A Farce in a New Dimension') to give it a run there and justify a transfer to the West End; subsequently, to everyone's surprise, it proved a highly successful repertory play, and even the most conservative reps found themselves doing good business with it. Simpson has also contributed successfully to several West End revues, and for all practical purposes may be taken as one of the most obviously popular of the new dramatists, despite a certain, probably increasing, amount of resistance from the critics.

The reason for this resistance can be explained quite simply by reference to any of Simpson's plays: it is his complete abandonment of any form of continuity. Not only is there no plot in any normal sense of the term, but there is no attempt at character differentiation; most of the lines could be equally well delivered by any character on the scene and even in *One Way Pendulum*, his most highly developed piece, the only formal device for holding the play together is the attribution to each character of an *idée fixe*, in the humours tradition, so that if travel is the subject we know it must be Aunt Mildred speaking, if it is weighing-machines or funerals Kirby Groomkirby must be concerned, and so on. And in every play the pattern of constant *non sequitur* is rigidly adhered to, so that the participants, as well as being non-existent as individual characters, cannot even communicate with each other at the most elementary level.

All this means that Simpson's plays are quite arbitrary in their overall effect as well as line by line and scene by scene; they are strips of varying lengths cut from the same roll, and

there is no reason at all why they should not be lengthened or shortened at will. In a note to the one-act version of *A Resounding Tinkle* Simpson remarks: 'From time to time parts of the play may seem to become detached from the main body. No attempt, well intentioned or not, should be made from the auditorium to nudge these back into position while the play is in motion. They will eventually drop off and are quite harmless.' And though this is obviously just a squib, it has enough truth in it to be uncomfortable; the fact that *A Resounding Tinkle* could be cut by more than half in its final version and *One Way Pendulum* reduced by nearly an hour for television without any noticeable harm being done is not entirely without significance.

The first version of *A Resounding Tinkle*, though in many ways gauche and awkward – the one-act version improves on it in other respects besides just being shorter – is of particular interest because in it Simpson shows his hand more clearly than elsewhere. Not only is there a character representing the author brought on to comment every so often, but there are a number of other direct acknowledgements from the stage that this is a play being performed, that the audience may have certain expectations and requirements, and that these are not being met. The picture of home life with Bro and Minnie Paraddock (all that is left in the final version) is here interrupted by the arrival of two comedians who perform a sketch in the kitchen and are then left by themselves to entertain the audience. The second scene begins with a long speech from the 'author' apologizing for the performance, suggesting that all the actors are drunk, but in any case their sobriety would not help matters, as the play came to him in Portuguese and he doesn't know a word of the language. Then there is a sequence in which the characters discuss Bergson's ideas on comedy, another long speech by a technician about a supposed reaction-index which is being compiled, and in Act II there is a scene when we see the actress playing Minnie talking to a couple of cleaners behind the scenes, and a final parody discussion by the critics of the play we have just been watching.

The technique used, it will be seen, is all very self-consciously experimental; the audience is told so several times and its

offence at not receiving what it probably feels it has a right to expect in the theatre is carefully smoothed down by letting it into the joke. The author's speech in the first act contains among other material what is probably, even allowing for its context, Simpson's own apology for his technique.

There is no desire, no intention on my part, or on the part of any of us on this side of the footlights, to impose upon you any ready-made idea of our own as to what this play ought to turn out to be. So often the author – we have all known him – moves invisibly among his audience nudging one and distracting another, muttering and mouthing among his betters. Or he leans forward from time to time to make simultaneous overtures of sumptuous impropriety to every Aunt Edna in the house. Such has never been my conception of the relationship that should exist between us. No. It is together that we must shape the experience which is the play we shall all of us have shared. The actors are as much the audience as the audience themselves, in precisely the same way that the audience are as much the actors as the actors themselves. We are all spectators of one another, mutual witnesses of each other's discomfiture. . . .

The implication here, that each audience, indeed each member of each audience, constructs his own play from the materials offered by author and actors, holds good for all Simpson's plays, and perhaps explains why opinion on them is divided sharply into those who find them funny and those who do not (for if one does not they work in such a way that there will be precious little else to appreciate). It is difficult to suggest the flavour of Simpson's humour without quoting a whole scene, but something may emerge just from a description of the sort of action we can expect from his plays. In the final version of *A Resounding Tinkle* (which is taken mainly from Act II of the original but with an interpolation from Act I, Scene 1, a new ending and a character change whereby Don Paradock becomes Uncle Ted) the Paradocks are complaining that the elephant which has just been delivered is too big – it is certainly bigger than the one they usually have. On the other hand, their neighbour's snake is too small, so small it can be fitted in a pencil-box, so they decide to exchange animals. Someone arrives at the door to invite Bro to form a government, but he refuses ('How can I start forming a government at six o'clock in the evening?') and it may all

have been a joke; then Uncle Ted comes in and turns out to have changed sex, though no one seems to feel any surprise at this, or indeed at anything else that happens in the play.

The Hole, the new one-act play Simpson wrote to complete a double bill at the Royal Court with the one-act version of *A Resounding Tinkle*, is a slight piece with even less plot than that, but as far as construction goes it is easily the most finished of Simpson's works; indeed, it is the only one which shows any sign of 'construction' at all. It is built in the form of an elaborate rondo, the recurrent themes being a conversation between two women, one of whose husbands does all he can to be different from everyone else, while the other's does all he can to be the same, and the unchanging vision of the Visionary, who lives in a private world. In between the recurrences of these themes there are interludes in which three widely differing people come along and, having examined a hole in the road, proceed to explore a succession of possible interpretations of it: it is a chaos of jumbled sports, an aquarium, a prison, a voodoo rite – or perhaps even just a hole with an electrical junction-box in it. The strictly logical nature of Simpson's fantasy has never been more clearly demonstrated, nor more lightly carried, since here for once the temptation, ever present in Simpson's work, to work every idea to death by overelaboration is on the whole mercifully resisted.

With *One Way Pendulum*, Simpson's second full-length play, we do approach, however obliquely, something a little like a plot: Kirby Groomkirby stays constantly in his room upstairs trying to teach a collection of speak-your-weight machines the 'Hallelujah Chorus', despite the obstructions of one who will not say anything but 'Fifteen stone, ten pounds'; Kirby always wears black (plot point). Meanwhile downstairs his mother is always worrying what they would do with the left-over food if they did not pay Myra Gantry to come in and eat it all up; his sister keeps a skull on the mantelpiece to remind her of death, except that it doesn't much; his aunt in her wheelchair is convinced she is touring the Outer Hebrides, and his father, in the spare moments from standing in front of his own parking meters at sixpence a time to scrape together enough money to pay the bills, is building a do-it-yourself Old Bailey in the living-room. When this is

complete a judge and jury move in and start trying the father, Arthur Groomkirby, for some unnamed offence, before finally discovering that it is Kirby who should really be on trial: his passion for wearing black has driven him to provide occasions for it by killing numerous people so that he can attend their funerals. Fortunately, however, the judge lets him go, on the grounds that if he were executed now the law would be cheated of exacting due penalty for all the crimes he may subsequently commit.

One Way Pendulum, as it happens, provides a fairly full demonstration of the theories of drama suggested in the first version of *A Resounding Tinkle* as put into practice: there is the classic Bergsonian subject of humour, the human being acting as – and consequently treated like – a machine (Sylvia refers to Aunt Mildred at one point as a ‘great old-fashioned thing . . . cluttering up the place’), as well as its inevitable Simpsonian topsy-turvy reversal, the machine (weighing-machine in this case) acting like and treated as a human being. There is the wilful discontinuity of the action, and the ruthlessly logical and in the end joylessly exhaustive exploration of the possibilities inherent in each absurd premise (the cross-examination of Arthur about his meeting with Myra Gantry is a classic instance of this process in its most extreme form). Finally there is the employment of the gag (frequently derived from some sort of pun or double-entendre) as the basic dramatic unit. It replaces plot with a series of interlinked gags, and the action, such as it is, progresses by a number of ‘visual puns’ like that which turns Arthur’s do-it-yourself courtroom into a real court. It also replaces character, since each participant is characterized, if at all, by a running gag like Aunt Mildred’s obsession with travel. And though some of the gags are good ones (the notion of the singing weighing-machines, for example) the net result just goes to demonstrate the futility of trying to build a play out of units so small and insubstantial, with nothing firmer to bind it together: even judged by the amount of amusement to be derived from the gags as they occur the procedure is unsatisfactory, since gags without anything else soon pall. (How many comedians can play for longer than fifteen minutes at a time?)

In any case the gags are all of very much the same type; deprived of any possible foundation in character they rapidly reduce themselves to various forms of the same obsessive verbal doodling. Charles Marowitz, reviewing Simpson's latest play, *The Form* (a tiresome one-act fantasy about a man who gets through an interview on the principle that if you look after the answers, the questions will look after themselves, and then grows so powerful that his former interrogator becomes a humble amanuensis, recording his slightest pronouncement) in *Encore* remarked unkindly but aptly that 'There is about Simpson the odour of civil service levity; the kind of pun-laden high-jinks one associates with banter around the tea trolley and the frolics of Ministry amateur societies', and this seems to me to place him exactly. His plays, aspiring to be considered illustrations of the Absurd (he once remarked to an interviewer 'Sometimes I'm afraid that form distorts what is essentially amorphous. One's breaking faith with chaos'), end up as a rule with absurdity in a much humbler form, and one which very rapidly loses its charms in a life-and-death struggle with the law of diminishing returns.

ANN JELLICOE

ANN JELLICOE IS CERTAINLY exotic, and perhaps unique, among the younger dramatists in that her prime ambition initially was to be a director, and her first full-length play, *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, was, in fact, written first and foremost as a means, she hoped, of strengthening her hand when it came to the practical realization of this ambition. Her experience up to writing this play, which won third prize in the *Observer* drama competition of 1956 (along with *A Resounding Tinkle* and an Australian play), had, in fact, been largely in the field of direction: born in Middlesbrough in 1928, she studied at the Central School of Speech and Drama, then worked in repertory and travelled before joining the staff in 1952. During her two years as staff producer at the Central School she was responsible for many student productions, and since leaving has frequently returned to direct, mainly productions of plays by modern English writers (her productions of *The Hole* and *Live Like Pigs* in particular were far superior to their original professional productions). In 1952 she founded and ran for two years an open-stage theatre club, the Cockpit Theatre, directing many plays there, including an early one-act indiscretion of her own, which she now prefers to forget, in which according to her own account she fell prey to the contemporary vogue for the verse-plays of Christopher Fry, with disastrous consequences.

In 1956, wanting if possible to break into the professional theatre as a director, she began work upon *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, not fully understanding then that no one is looked upon more askance in the theatre than an author, particularly a new, young author, who wants to direct his (or even more startlingly *her*) own plays. However, the play won its *Observer* prize, was accepted for production on the strength of this by the English Stage Company, and staged with the help of a grant from Schweppes. Ann Jellicoe and George Devine shared the direction, and the play was a complete commercial disaster; from the critics it received slightly more approval than from playgoers,

but on the whole not very much. Even so, one or two critics recognized that Ann Jellicoe was trying, not yet with complete success admittedly, to do something quite new in the English theatre: to make her play primarily something which happened in front of its audience and made its effect as a totality, rather than a piece of neatly carpentered literary craftsmanship which would 'read well' and work only by way of its dialogue's appeal to the mind.

The script of *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, in fact, makes very little sense just read cold: it is simply the short score from which a full orchestral sound can be conjured by a skilled musician, or the scenario for a ballet waiting for a composer to write the music and a choreographer to stage it; it is, not surprisingly considering the circumstances of its writing, 'director's theatre' to the nth degree, clearly seen by the author mainly as an *aide-mémoire* in the transference of her initial conception from the stage of her own mind to a real, physical stage. Consequently when staged it makes extraordinary demands on the playgoer schooled in the traditional techniques of the English stage: he expects the play he sees to be, in effect, written mainly for the ear, with the eye required to act on its own just once in a while, when it may note a bit of business and aid the mind to deduce some logical significance for it. But here is a play which assaults (the word is used advisedly) both eye and ear, and makes very little appeal to the intellect at all.

It is about a group of teddy-boys, whose behaviour throughout is instinct with a purely arbitrary spirit of violence, one or two outsiders who become involved mysteriously with them (Caldaro, a young American; Dodo, a retarded 13-year-old) and Greta, their spiritual leader, a legendary figure of destruction and in the end, when she gives birth to a child, of creation too, who corresponds presumably to Kali, the Indian goddess of creation and destruction who is the 'mad mother' of the title ('All creation is the sport of my mad mother Kali'). Much of the dialogue, most of it, in fact, is almost entirely incantatory in effect, with a minimum of analysable sense; just enough to create the atmosphere of menace and violence always on the point of being unleashed, without ever defining the nature and purpose (if any)

of either too exactly. Quite a lot of the 'dialogue' indeed, is merely sound – cries and ejaculations, repeated monosyllables shorn of any associative effect and used entirely for their tonal qualities. On the page it looks as intimidating and uncommunicative as the hieroglyphs of some unknown tongue; in the theatre it all surges over and around one, a strange, disturbing pattern of sights and sounds which produces a corresponding series of emotional reactions from which gradually a total picture of a violent, instinctive way of life emerges: it is about people who are for the most part inarticulate and uncommunicative, and instead of trying to externalize their emotions and reactions in necessarily stilted and artificial words it creates in the theatre a sort of symbolic equivalent of the mental climate in which they live and thrusts us willy-nilly into it.

But it can do this only so long as we abandon ourselves to the experience instead of stopping to question it. As soon as we deliberately extract ourselves from participation in what is happening and ask what any particular line or section *means*, we are lost and the play is lost to us. In an interview in the *New Theatre Magazine*, published by members of the drama faculty of Bristol University, Ann Jellicoe herself put all this very clearly:

I think the word 'meaning' shows exactly what is wrong with people's attitudes. If they were to ask 'What is the play about?' it would be a better approach. This is a new kind of play, which demands a new approach. Most playgoers today are not used to taking anything direct in the theatre. What they do is transform it into words and put it through their brain. For instance, there is a scene in my play where Caldaro is knocked out, and the Teds stand him on his feet, wrap him up in newspaper, cavort round him, chanting until they get to a pitch of ecstasy when they tear the newspaper off him. Now in this action there are hardly any words that make sense – there is nothing which your intellect can take in. If you sit watching and say 'What does this mean? What does this mean?' you're not going to get anywhere; but if you allow yourself to be excited by the visual action and the gradual crescendo of noise underlining this, you may begin to appreciate what it's about. . . .

You see, so many plays tell you what is happening the whole time. People don't act angry; they tell you they're angry. Now, my play is about incoherent people – people who have no power of expression, of analysing their emotions. They don't know why they're afraid; they

don't even know that they are afraid. So they have to compensate for their fear by attacking someone else; they're insecure and frustrated, and they have to compensate for that by being big, and violent. And all this is directly shown, instead of being explained; if you're content to watch it without thinking all the time 'What is the meaning?' so that you don't even see or hear, you're so busy thinking – then you will get what it's about.

The Sport of My Mad Mother might well appeal to a variety of people for a variety of reasons, but the Girl Guides Association is about the last body one would expect to find its attitudes, its tone or its style palatable. Yet shortly after it was produced Ann Jellicoe was commissioned by them to write a show for staging at the Empire Pool, Wembley, the only conditions being that it should be 'of interest to youth', have a 'positive ending', make room for some foreign guides, and have a cast of about 800 girls, 100 boys, and possibly some adults. (The most likely explanation of the commission seems to be that they had heard she wrote 'interesting plays about teenagers'.) Her imagination fired by the possibilities inherent in the form of presentation, she decided to accept the commission and produce something personal which at the same time satisfied all these conditions. The result, *The Rising Generation*, was rejected out of hand by the committee, even after complete rewriting and conventionalization, but the original text was later published in *Ark*, the magazine of the Royal College of Art.

From this it emerges as by far the most interesting and imaginative work ever written in the simple but spectacular form of the youth pageant (though that, admittedly, is not saying very much). It is a story about intolerance and totalitarian rule, told in parable form, though a parable, surely, little calculated to appeal to the Girl Guide ideal: it postulates a conspiracy by the monstrous regiment of women, headed by Mother, 'an enormous woman half-masked with a padded headdress and shoes', to dominate the world and exterminate men. Men are banished and expunged from history; girls at school have to repeat religiously 'Shakespeare was a woman. Milton was a woman. The Black Prince was a woman. Robin Hood, she was a woman. King John was a woman. Newton was a woman'; while their teacher firmly

indoctrinates them: 'Men are black. Men are thick. Men are tall. Men are strong. Men will tear you, beat you, eat you. When you're older, you will know.' But finally the girls get together with the boys to rebel against the tyrannical domination of Mother, and though she puts into operation her final threat, the Bomb, they survive and as the show ends the whole vast arena is transformed into a flying saucer to carry them all to a new life somewhere in space. Throughout, the piece not only says something, and says it clearly enough to 'appeal to youth', but it also uses the wide open spaces of the Empire Pool and its resources brilliantly: the spotlight pursuit of the boy Stephen, the triumphal progress of Mother, her opponents held at bay by a battalion of charladies with flaming mops, and the great final transformation could hardly fail to make their effect. It was perhaps too much to expect the Girl Guides Association to see the singular merits of *The Rising Generation*, but by refusing it they rejected the most interesting work they are ever likely to receive in response to a commission, and incidentally deprived the 7,000 Guides who fill the Empire Pool every night when such a show is on of a strikingly effective piece of spectacular entertainment, to put it no higher.

If *The Rising Generation* suggests in some ways a re-handling of themes from *The Sport of My Mad Mother* in a rather different context, Ann Jellicoe's next play, *The Knack*, staged by the English Stage Company at the Arts, Cambridge, in 1961, shows a complete departure in subject-matter, allied with a remarkable consistency in form and style. We might have imagined that the style employed in *The Sport of My Mad Mother* applied only to the completely inarticulate and non-intellectual who could not be got at in dramatic terms any other way, but even from the *New Theatre Magazine* interview we should have known better, for there Ann Jellicoe generalizes her views on dramatic expression like this:

When I write a play I am trying to communicate with the audience. I do this by every means in my power – I try to get at them through their eyes, by providing visual action; I try to get at them through their ears, for instance by noises and rhythm. These are not loose effects; they are introduced to communicate with the audience directly through their senses, to reinforce the total effect of the play, and they are

always geared to character and situation. The theatre is a medium which works upon people's imagination and emotion – not merely their intellect. And I am trying to use every possible effect that the theatre can offer to stir up the audience – to get at them through their emotions. . . . I write this way because – the image that everybody has of the rational, intellectual and intelligent man – I don't believe it's true. I think people are driven by their emotions, and by their fears and insecurities.

The Knack might be a direct illustration of this statement: it is a comedy about, as far as can be seen, normally intelligent, articulate people caught at precisely the point where the image of rational, intelligent man breaks down just because they are completely ruled by their emotions, their fears and insecurities. The subject of these feelings, naturally enough, is sex – where else is the normally civilized man more subject to non-civilized, indeed anti-civilized, influences? The situation is classically simple. Three men, Tolen, Tom, and Colin, live in one house: Tolen has more than enough sex, being a living demonstration of sexual determination, stamina, and resilience: Tom, having one supposes struck a fairly happy balance, is not violently involved; and Colin, their landlord, does not get anything like enough and worries about it. Into their lives comes an innocent – at least she seems to be an innocent – called Nancy, and a tussle for her develops between Tolen, who sees her as yet another scalp for his belt, and Colin (though their conflict only slowly develops, and at one stage Colin is happy to let Tolen seduce Nancy while he takes notes on technique). Colin is to some extent in a one-up position because he is landlord, but Tolen has the advantage of him in the enviable field of sexual experience, and while Nancy is out of the room being sick after a fainting fit Tolen tries to play off his advantage against Colin's, offering to take Colin into a girl-sharing arrangement he is negotiating with a friend if in return Colin will throw out Tom, whose ironic and unpredictable presence he finds irksome, in favour of the other womanizer. Their plans are swept aside, however, by Nancy's vociferous assertions upon recovery that she was raped while unconscious – by Colin. Colin and Tolen have a violent row on the point, Tolen saying Colin couldn't, Colin saying he didn't

but he could; finally Tolen leaves and Colin and the girl are left together under the friendly eye of Tom. . . .

That is what happens – what *happens*, not for the most part what is *said*. Whole sections of the text make no noticeable sense in themselves, because it is always what is going on, and what the audience apprehends from participating in what is going on, that counts. Often the dialogue is simply a series of disjointed *non sequiturs* or uncomprehending repetitions, and in one key scene, where Colin and Tom gradually draw Nancy into their fantasy that the bed in the room is actually a piano, of ‘pings’ and ‘plongs’ variously distributed and extending virtually uninterrupted over some three pages of the script. The most remarkable quality of the play, in fact, is the sheer drive of the action, physical and emotional, right through its three acts in one unbroken movement; in the theatre not only does the play not demand rationalization on the part of its audience but, unlike *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, which is by comparison sometimes uncertain and immature (the last act in particular fails to cap the previous two conclusively), it positively forbids it: the spectator is carried along irresistibly by the verve and ebullience of the play, and at the end, even if he does not know what, stage by stage, it means, he certainly knows vividly what it is about.

In the five years between *The Sport of My Mad Mother* and *The Knack* Ann Jellicoe has matured and developed extraordinarily as a dramatist while continuing obstinately to plough her solitary furrow (her translation, during that time, of two Ibsen plays, *Rosmersholm* and *The Lady from the Sea*, has had no noticeable effect on her writing). Her plays are quite unlike anyone else’s, and even in a generation of dramatists distinguished above all else for their sure grasp of practical theatre her work stands out by virtue of its complete command of theatrical effect. Her plays are difficult to stage, undeniably, since they depend so completely on their theatrical qualities and the sensitivity and accuracy with which the director can cover the bare framework of mere words with the intricately organized architecture fully drawn out in the creator’s head. But once staged, and staged well, they infinitely repay the trouble; one only hopes it will not be another five years before she chooses again to face some director with such a challenge.

JOHN ARDEN

PERHAPS THE BIGGEST SINGLE thing to stand in the English Stage Company's favour, whenever and wherever these things finally come to be totted up, will be their continued championship of John Arden in the face of a Press dubious to hostile and of almost complete public apathy (his three plays to be performed publicly at the Royal Court have achieved in all a mere seventy-three performances). And in this perseverance they have been absolutely right, as more and more people, both among the critics and among the theatre-going public, are coming to recognize. All the same, the hostility and plain indifference manifested by the vast majority of the plays' first spectators is quite easy to understand; one could even understand why many not properly attuned to Arden's work should find it downright boring. The explanation resides in one fact, simple in itself but extremely complex in its implications: Arden's view of his characters and situations is in effect the most unflinchingly amoral in the British theatre today.

Not immoral; that would be shocking (even now, since conventions still rule even where convictions have flagged), it would be 'provocative', and most important of all it would imply by categorically rejecting certain standards that these standards nevertheless existed – there would still be clear, dramatic blacks and whites, even if they did not always come in the expected places. But amorality is something very different: we can stand a little uncertainty about which are our heroes and which are our villains, but where do we stand in a situation which seems to deny the very possibility of heroism or villainy? The question may not be all that worrying on a purely personal level – one could argue that such concepts as heroism and villainy have little meaning in Pinter's work, for example – but Arden brings us face to face with it in its baldest form by embodying his attitudes in plays which appear to be about general social, moral, and political issues: colour prejudice and prostitution, social clashes on a housing estate, pacifism, the treatment of old age.

For behind Arden's work there seems to be brooding one basic principle: not exactly the obvious one that today there are no causes – that would be altogether too facile, and in any case just not true – but that there are too many. There are as many causes as there are people (more, since many are quite capable of espousing two or more mutually exclusive causes at the same time), and only the naïve can suppose that any two people who are, say, pacifists (to choose a nice, convenient label) will believe the same things for the same reasons. In other words, in all Arden's plays the characters we meet are first and foremost just people: not concepts cast into a vaguely human mould, with built-in labels saying 'good' or 'bad', 'hero' or 'villain', to help us into the right grooves. (Arden himself in an interview has expressed 'grave objections to being presented with a character on the stage whom you know to be the author's mouthpiece' and said that he 'cannot see why a social play should not be so designed that we may find ourselves understanding the person's problems, but not necessarily approving his reactions to them'.)

It follows, therefore, that the behaviour of any one person or group does not imply any general judgement. *The Waters of Babylon* is not a play in favour of prostitution and tenant-exploitation (or for that matter the reverse); *Live Like Pigs* tells us nothing about 'The Welfare State'; *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* is not for or against pacifism *per se*; *The Happy Haven* offers no solution to the problem of old age: they are just plays about individual people affected one way or another by these issues. Hence, perhaps – until one gets used to Arden's way of seeing things at least – the confusion and irritation of his audiences: when 'parity of esteem' for all the characters is pushed so far, identification and taking sides become difficult if not impossible, and though undeniably the characters conflict – they are conflicting all the time – for many theatregoers a conflict in which they are not asked themselves to participate is in effect no conflict at all; left rudderless and all at sea, they end up lost and bored.

This happened in its most extreme form, to judge from the notices anyway, with his first professionally staged play, *The Waters of Babylon*, and with his recent *The Happy Haven*. At the time *The Waters of Babylon* was put on for one Sunday night

production-without-décor at the Royal Court, Arden was still a practising architect (he was born in Barnsley in 1930, educated partly at state, partly at public schools, and studied architecture at Cambridge and Edinburgh); he had written various plays in verse or prose (including a schoolboy effort 'on the death of Hitler written in the style of *Samson Agonistes*' and 'a pseudo-Elizabethan tragedy on the Gunpowder Plot, which was very bad, a sort of academic play in verse'), had a period comedy about the building of a railway called *All Fall Down* (which he compares with Whiting's *Penny for a Song*) performed by fellow students at Edinburgh, and won a B.B.C. Northern Region prize for his radio play *The Life of Man*. This, which he calls 'a sort of seafaring thing' with 'a little too much of *Moby Dick* in it', attracted the attention of the Royal Court, and though they rejected the first play he submitted (based on an Arthurian legend), they accepted *The Waters of Babylon* as the first of their low-budget Sunday-night ventures.

In general the critics did not think much of it, and without agreeing with them one can easily see why: it is in many ways the most teasing and apparently perverse of all his plays in what it says (or appears to be saying), even apart from the eccentricity of its form and style. Briefly, its central character, its 'hero' if you like, is a Polish émigré who leads a double life, working in an architect's office by day while out of office hours he runs a lodging-house occupied by eighty exploited foreign tenants and a number of the string of prostitutes he 'manages'. Worse, he claims to have been in Buchenwald, and so he was, but as a member of the German army. And yet in spite of all this he is certainly the most sympathetically delineated character, in most respects amiable, good-natured and thoroughly likeable; and so indeed are the prostitutes and ex-prostitutes, with whom his relations are of the friendliest. If we start lining up characters and concepts, as many of the play's first audience did, we shall be forced to some very odd conclusions. But that, clearly, is not Arden's intention; instead he gives us a picturesque mixture of comedy and a little drama as Krank (Sigismanfred Krankiewicz) tries desperately to raise the money to pay off a patriotic fellow Pole who is setting up a bomb plot in his lodging-house by rigging, with the aid of

'Uncle Charlie' Butterthwaite, erstwhile 'Napoleon of Local Government', the results of a new municipal lottery (the play began as a satire on the Premium Bond system). There are really no heroes and no villains; Krank is quite sympathetic, but too contradictory and elusive to be really heroic, the girls and the crooks are mostly likeable, while even their obvious opponents – the straight Negro councillor Joseph Caligula, the fatuous M.P. Loap, and the shifty chauvinist Henry Ginger – are too complicated to stand, singly or together, as villains.

Worse still, for an already sufficiently puzzled audience, the style in which this mystifying confection is written offers manifold complexities in itself. Some of the dialogue is written in a springy, colloquial, realistic style, some, particularly the maliciously accurate parodies of the Hyde Park orators' styles, suggests that satire is intended, some, especially Krank's monologues, is written in a fairly highly wrought free verse, and to make matters worse several of the characters have a disconcerting habit of bursting into song at odd moments. Indeed, were it not for the life and vigour of the whole thing, its tremendous theatrical drive and panache, the brisk conclusion of most reviewers that 'this young man may have ideas but cannot begin to put them together into a play' might be comprehensible, if not quite forgivable.

Not quite forgivable because, even apart from the evident and abundant life of the play, Arden does at one point come unusually close to a direct statement of what he is at, and an attentive ear should not have missed it. In the last act Paul, the patriot, is berating Krank for his war record; 'We know what you were', he cries. Krank turns on him:

But I don't know what *you* are. Or you, Henry Ginger.
Or all the rest of you, with your pistols and your orations,
And your bombs in your private house, and your fury,
And your national pride and honour. This is the lunacy.
This was the cause, the carrying through of all that insensate war,
This is the rage and purposed madness of your lives,
That *I*, Krank, do not know. I *will* not know it,
Because, if I know it, from that light day forward,
I am a man of time, place, society and accident;

Which is what I must not be. Do you understand me . . . ?
 The world is running mad in every direction,
 It is quicksilver, shattered, here, here, here, here.
 All over the floor. Go on, hustle after it,
 Chase it, dear Paul. But I choose to follow
 Only such fragments as I can easily catch.
 I catch them, I keep them such time as I choose,
 Then roll them away down and follow another.
 Is that philosophy? It is a reason anyway. . . .

In all his plays Arden has chosen to do just this, to follow only such fragments as he can easily catch, catch them, keep them such time as he chooses, then roll them away and follow others; his world is shattered, like ours, and the plays he has made out of it are comprehensible only if considered as certain fragments selected, isolated and shaped into a whole; what we must not do is to assume that they are microcosms of a complete, coherent world, and then seek to read its character in their various faces.

This becomes even more evident when Arden's next two plays, *Soldier, Soldier* and *Live Like Pigs* (*Soldier, Soldier* was actually written first, for B.B.C. Television, but not produced until two years later), are taken into consideration. For in them the style already in the making in *The Waters of Babylon* emerges fully fledged, and the affinities of this style as well as the subject-matter it is used on enforce a more detailed consideration both of Arden's style and of his intentions. The name most frequently evoked in connexion with Arden's work is that of Brecht, and the affinity is certainly there. Arden, paradoxically, is at once the most and the least Brechtian of all modern British dramatists: most, because their views on the proper relationship between the audience and what is happening on stage and their means of achieving it are almost identical; least, because one could readily imagine that Arden's plays would have been written in exactly the same way if Brecht had never existed. Basic to Arden's drama is something strikingly akin to Brecht's celebrated A-effect: as we have remarked already, though there are all sorts of conflicts taking place on stage, the audience is never invited to participate in them; it is even forcibly prevented on occasion from doing so. Instead it is invited to experience the play as a self-contained

totality, and to judge – though on a human level rather than in terms of general concepts (herein lies the vital difference between Arden's practice and Brecht's theory, though, of course, Brecht's practice is a good deal nearer to Arden than his theory would lead one to expect).

This is achieved largely through an unashamed and deliberate resort to 'theatricality', to various formal devices which keep the viewer constantly aware that he is in a theatre (or in front of a television screen) watching a *play*. Song plays an important part in Arden's work, and is used almost always quite non-realistically: anyone may express him- or herself in song, usually song closely related in form and style to the English folksong and ballad. So, too, with passages of heightened speech in rhyme or sometimes in free verse which is still appreciably verse rather than prose: indeed, in Arden's later plays the distinction between verse and prose has become more marked, and he now finds passages in the earlier plays in which such a distinction is not clearly made muzzy and unsatisfactory. He says, for instance, of *The Waters of Babylon*, where there is a lot of verse;

I feel on re-reading it that many of the scenes would have been better if I had gone about it more naturalistically, and used a more natural prose. I think the use of formal verse and straightforward vernacular prose in juxtaposition is quite a good solution even in a modern play. If people are speaking formal verse with lines that rhyme, the audience does not have to worry whether it sounds natural or not. They are talking poetry. It's with the half-and-half thing that one is in trouble.

And what sort of subject-matter is the critical detachment achieved in this way to be applied to? In both *Soldier, Soldier* and *Live Like Pigs* to evidently 'social' subjects, since in each case we witness an unsettling incursion of uncontrollable outside forces into a hitherto settled community. The only trouble, from a conventional viewpoint, is deciding which side we should be on, that of the intruder or that of the intruded upon. Either, our preconceptions would lead us to suppose, the dramatist must be for order, authority and all the rest of it and against the forces of anarchy and disorder, or he must be against established complacency and for those who rebel against it. But somehow neither

of these neat theorizations seems to work in either case. In the first the Soldier, an obvious bad lot, lies and cheats his way into the household of another soldier missing from his regiment, pretending he knows the boy and that he alone can extract him from some terrible trouble he has fallen into; he proceeds to bleed the family dry, seduce the son's wife, and make off with as much of their savings as he can conveniently extract. So, surely, we should be against him and for his victims. But no, not a bit of it; like Krank, this 'randy chancer' is strangely likeable; there is certainly something fetching about his all-out way of life. But on the other hand the Scuffhams, his victims, are not presented as in any way villains of hypocrisy and complacency who deserve all they get; they are not very bright, admittedly, but they might fairly be described, like the Jacksons in *Live Like Pigs*, as 'undistinguished but not contemptible'.

Their situation, in fact, is in many ways identical with that of the Jacksons, a cosy conventional family happy in their housing-estate semi-detached until the Sawneys, a wild and disreputable family of near-gipsies, are moved protesting into the house next door. But in *Live Like Pigs*, since a political question (for or against the Welfare State?) appears to be involved, the issue of allegiances is even more acute. On this subject one can hardly do better than quote from Arden's own Introductory Note to the printed text:

On the one hand, I was accused by the Left of attacking the Welfare State: on the other, the play was *hailed* as a defence of anarchy and amorality. So perhaps I had better declare myself. I approve outright neither of the Sawneys nor of the Jacksons. Both groups uphold standards of conduct which are incompatible, but which are both valid in their correct context.

The Sawneys are an anachronism. They are the direct descendants of the 'sturdy beggars' of the sixteenth century, and the apparent chaos of their lives becomes an ordered pattern when seen in terms of a wild empty countryside and a nomadic existence. Put out of their fields by enclosing landlords, they found such an existence possible for four hundred years. Today, quite simply, there are too many buildings in Britain, and there is just no room for nomads. The family in this play fails to understand this, and becomes educated in what is known as the 'hard way', but which might also be called the 'inefficient way'.

The Jacksons are an undistinguished but not contemptible family, whose comparative cosiness is not strong enough to withstand the violent irruption into their affairs that the Sawneys bring. Their natural instincts of decency and kindness have never been subjected to a very severe test. When they are, they collapse. I do not regard them as being necessarily typical in this. They are the people I have chosen for the play, because they illustrate my theme in a fairly extreme form.

This passage has been worth quoting at length, because it is absolutely central to the full comprehension of Arden's methods and intentions. It makes it clear that his attitude to his creations is quite uncommitted; this means that, for instance, he does not defend the amorality of one group of characters nor, on the other hand, does he condemn it – they are individuals, and there are reasons, valid reasons, why they live as they do, even if they are displaced persons in the modern world. Similarly he does not condemn the very different standards of the Jacksons; they, too, have their reasons. He does not even seek to generalize from them about the behaviour of this *sort* of family; they also are individuals, just the people the dramatist has chosen for this particular play, and in doing so he, too, had his reasons.

Both *Soldier, Soldier* and *Live Like Pigs* achieved, despite and at least partly because of the initial misunderstandings, a modest measure of success (*Soldier, Soldier* even won the Italia Prize, thus laying to rest the B.B.C.'s doubts sufficiently for them to commission another play from Arden on the strength of it). But then both productions stressed the realistic elements at the expense of the others and tended if anything to underplay the comedy; in any case, they made the plays seem considerably more normal than *The Waters of Babylon*. But with his next play, *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959), Arden made a break with realism as it is generally understood on the English stage too decisive to be so easily smoothed over. As it happened, this appears to have made his style all the more acceptable (perhaps because playgoers still find it easier to take poetry and song in period drama than in a modern setting) and the play is in some intangible way his best known and most successful to date – 'intangible' because on the stage it did little better than the others (twenty-eight performances to twenty-three of *Live Like Pigs*

and twenty-two of *The Happy Haven*), but somehow it is the play of his that everyone seems to have heard of; it is revived by amateurs from time to time and the printed text continues to sell steadily.

The plot concerns the arrival of a group of deserters, led by Serjeant Musgrave, in a northern town in the 1880s, ostensibly recruiting but actually to teach the townfolk a lesson about war. In the town they are mistrusted at first – there are troubles at the mine and everyone equates soldiers with strike-breakers – but a little free beer gains them the amiability, if not exactly the friendship and confidence, of the miners, the mine-owner and his minions see the bit of colour and excitement offered by an all-out recruiting campaign a good thing to keep the workers occupied, and though one of the soldiers gets more or less accidentally killed in a struggle when the day of the meeting comes Musgrave is able to unfold his ideas to an audience initially ready and willing to receive them. But before long he has shocked them by revealing that in one of the boxes he has brought are the bones of a local boy, killed during the occupation of a foreign land; in reprisals five natives were killed for him, so now with the inexorable arithmetic of military logic Musgrave has decided that this five must again be multiplied by five to produce the number of those in authority who must be killed so that the lesson on the horrors of war will be well and truly learnt. Here his supporters start wavering; this is not what they had expected and one at least has believed their mission to be against killing *per se*. In the confusion the dragoons arrive, the soldiers are disarmed, and the miners, some of them happily forgetful of what is being enacted in front of them, others compelled by the presence of the army to join in, dance to celebrate the re-establishment of law and order.

This, even from such a bald summary, is obviously a very complex play, and again one must beware of confusing characters with concepts. At the time it was often found confusing because the liberal spectator saw in it a tract about pacifism which seemed to show that pacifism did not work; for the naïve this was simply because Musgrave and his men are defeated at the end; for the more perceptive because the motives and methods of the soldiers are so at odds with each other and often so apparently wrong-

headed that it might be interpreted as an attempt to discredit pacifism by discrediting pacifists. Either Arden is for the pacifists, the argument would run, or he is against them, but if he is for them why has he not made them largely creditable and heroic, while if he is against them why has he made their opponents so discreditable and unheroic? Now there seems little doubt from what we know of Arden's personal views and what he has told us of the play's origins (the general concept of the town taken over from an American film by Hugo Fregonese, *The Raid*; the specific atrocity which inspires Musgrave's crusade from a parallel occurrence in Cyprus) that his sympathies are with the pacifists, yet clearly all his instincts as a dramatist prevent him from siding unequivocally with anyone; though the Parson and the Mayor come perhaps closer to hostile caricatures than any of his other characters, it is evident throughout that this is a play about individual, complicated human beings, and any simple alignment of character and concept is doomed to failure.

Musgrave himself, for instance, is right and sympathetic in his outrage at the atrocities which have been perpetrated abroad, but his decision that they can be expiated and a clean start be made only by a further shedding of blood is clearly much open to doubt; his 'logic' of order and discipline is inhuman and fails to take the natural way of things into account. From any point of view except one he is to blame for his blindness in supposing, as Mrs Hitchcock puts it in the last scene, that at the end of the world he could call a parade, and work everything out like a neat abstract geometrical progression; he is to blame for seeing life and love as a scribble on the neatly drawn, black-and-white plan of duty, rather than as the constants in terms of which any scheme of life must be drawn up. Unless, of course – and this is the one alternative – he is right when he says that God is with him; that he really is the representative of divine and by definition 'inhuman' justice that he believes himself to be. This point of view could be argued, but Arden does not here, any more than elsewhere, take sides; the idea serves simply to give coherence and a context to Musgrave's attitudes and help to explain why he is right in his terms just as Mrs Hitchcock is in hers, Attercliffe,

the completely non-violent soldier, in his, and the dragoons no doubt in theirs (in an interview Arden has said himself that at the end 'law and order have been re-established by force; which, if you like, is the natural result of Musgrave trying to establish the opposite by force').

Formally *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* is one of Arden's most successful pieces, the mature expression of the theme of *Soldier, Soldier* and, in a different way, of *Live Like Pigs*: the sudden explosive incursion of the extraordinary and disruptive into the normal and fairly orderly. It has a very slow and elaborate exposition, setting the scene and building up the situation to the climatic burst of violent action, and the songs and passages of heightened speech are integrated more effectively than ever before into the structure as a whole – already the separation between formal and colloquial is becoming more clear cut and decisive. The move towards at once greater formality of presentation and greater clarity and simplicity of expression seen here in its initial stages was to find a more extreme expression in his next theatrical play, *The Happy Haven* (1960–1), but meanwhile he wrote *A Christmas Play* for the church of Brent Knoll, the Somerset village where he was living at the time. Of this there is little to say except that it is of a radiant grace and simplicity which make clear some of the lessons Arden has learnt from a study of the medieval stage and its techniques, and that its depiction of Herod is so sympathetic that one or two critics have been tempted to write about it as a nativity play in which Herod is the hero. This is, of course, a journalistic oversimplification, but it reflects the fact that even here Arden is not ready to paint in unmistakable blacks and whites; Herod may not receive more than his due, but what is due to him he receives in full, and his actions are placed clearly in their historical-political context so that we can see that he was not a monster but just someone acting reasonably and with excellent intentions within the limitations of his own rule of conduct – the extreme case perhaps, of 'understanding the person's problems, but not necessarily approving his reactions to them'?

The Happy Haven, which Arden worked upon during his year as Drama Fellow at Bristol University and first produced there

on an open stage, probably created a greater trouble in the breasts of the critics than any of his other plays when it reached the Royal Court in 1961. The things which worried them were (*a*) that all the characters wear masks of some sort at some stage in the production, and most of them do so throughout; (*b*) that this is a comedy (Arden calls it a 'pantomime') about old people in an old folks' home. This meant to most critics that it was (*a*) crankily experimental and (*b*) a joke in bad taste. Both of which conclusions are distinctly curious. As far as the masks are concerned, there are excellent practical reasons for them, which Arden details in the *Encore* interview already quoted, among them mainly the advantages of using young actors so that the play is not slowed down and any too close realism which might incur the charge of cruelty is avoided. This charge has nevertheless been made; indeed, it is the basis of the assertion that the play is a joke in bad taste. But here we are back at the old trouble which has dogged us in any consideration of Arden's work, the confusion of characters with concepts. Certainly the old people are not represented as sweet, amiable, harmless old souls, ever ready with proverbial wisdom and tearful smiles of gratitude for any small attention which is shown them; instead, they are idiosyncratic human beings of distinct and complex temperaments (in itself perhaps a criticism to those who choose to believe that anyone over 70 must automatically become a depersonalized plaster saint). Arden chooses to tell the truth about old age, the unsentimental truth, summed up in Mrs Phineus's great speech in the second act, and sentimentalists do not like it:

I'm an old old lady
And I don't have long to live.
I am only strong enough to take
Not to give. No time left to give.
I want to drink, I want to eat,
I want my shoes taken off my feet.
I want to talk but not to walk
Because if I walk, I have to know
Where it is I want to go.
I want to sleep but not to dream
I want to play and win every game
To live with love but not to love

The world to move but me not move
 I want I want for ever and ever
 The world to work, the world to be clever.
 Leave me be, but don't leave me alone.
 That's what I want. I'm a big round stone
 Sitting in the middle of a thunderstorm. . . .

But even supposing that this sort of attitude reflects discredit on the characters in the play – though surely the whole form in which it is cast, not to say its unmistakable humanity, forbids us to suppose so – and admitting that they show themselves in general quite capable of behaving just as badly as anyone else, what then? Does this make it an attack on old age itself? One would have to be pretty obtuse to think so. In fact, the plot of the play makes it, if we may assign any single moral to Arden for a moment, something much more like a plea for the old: an urging that they, too, are human beings and should be treated as such. Of course, such a schematic reading cannot be pushed too far – that is not Arden's way – but it has at least as much truth as the 'bad taste' view of the piece.

If it were the complete explanation, of course, the doctor who treats his patients as so many guinea-pigs would have to be the villain, but though he has been firmly pigeon-holed as such, notably by Mr Tom Milne in the *New Left Review*, this also is oversimplifying. Dr Copperthwaite, too, is acting with the best intentions; he, too, is in the right according to his own standards, and really sees his new youth elixir as a benefit to mankind, even if, carried away by his fanaticism on this subject he forgets to consider the feelings of the individual men and women in his charge, whom he intends to dose experimentally with the liquid. Indeed, whenever we seem at all in danger of seeing him too completely as the near-monster he becomes to the patients Arden devises a quick change of focus to help us see him in a far other and less intimidating light. For he is a weekend football player, and with his outside friends just an ordinary, undistinguished, rather juvenile young man. One of the patients, Mrs Letouzel, actually points out that this is so:

He's the undisputed custodian of everything that's good for us. Security. Reliability. Though some people have said he failed to save

the score the other Saturday at football. They relied on him to stop the goals, when he came back from the match he was swearing, frustrated – I know because I heard him. He'd let them through, he had to apologize, I tell you I heard him. Apologized – Copperthwaite – in his humility, to the Captain of the Team. . . . But despite that, you silly children, we are all his worms. And he says 'Turn, worms, turn', and he thinks we have got no choice!

But we see and hear it ourselves; just at the moment when he has made his big discovery he has a phone conversation with the captain of the football team, full of fourth-form humour about 'medical goods – plain envelopes' and schoolboy jollity, while later he has an equally revealing conversation with his mother, who is slyly trying to introduce him, rather against his will, to eligible young women. Mr Milne is very hard on the first speech, finding that 'an important point is being made in this apparent digression: at a moment which may radically affect a number of people's lives, the doctor can respond only with prep-school smut and a sense of responsibility which treats people as no more than guinea-pigs. Never *stated*, this point is inescapable if viewed in its proper context.' Now there may well be some truth in this, but it seems to be reading at once too much and too little into the lines. The moral judgement is too lofty, really, since if the speech does not show the doctor in a particularly flattering light, at least it suggests that by any but a rigidly puritanical standard he is, out of office hours and seen for once through the eyes of someone other than his patients, a fairly normal, not specially bright or mature sort of chap – a point which emerges even more forcefully in the even more apparent digression of his conversation with his mother. In other words, like almost all Arden's other characters he is not a two-dimensional stereotype representing some abstract concept, but a human being with certain standards: we can understand his problems, even if we do not necessarily approve of his reactions to them.

Arden's course up to now has been as unpredictable as any in the British theatre, and it is anybody's guess what he will do next. After the extreme formalism of *The Happy Haven* he chose in his next play, the television piece *Wet Fish*, to go to the other

extreme with a closer approach to naturalism than he had yet attempted, reducing the role of rhymed or appreciably formal verse to two short songs assigned to an evidently eccentric and in any case 'unEnglish' character. This latter turned out to be none other than our old friend Krank from *The Waters of Babylon*, complete with double life of architect's office by day and brothel-organization by night (not to mention Teresa at the other end of a phone and Alderman Charlie Butterthwaite rumbling in the distance). This time, however, we are shown mostly his 'respectable' life at work, since the office and the various jobs it has on hand – particularly the reconstruction of a fish shop for a friend of the architect – provide the play's principal material. Gathered into less than an hour and a half we have a tragi-comedy about the shop itself, the odd and intricate business-cum-romantic life of Krank, the initiation of a new female architect into business practice, some jiggery-pokery with the local council over new planning in the town, and quite a bit of semi-documentary stuff about the way an architect's office works. The result is rather a ragbag, but a lively one, bursting all over with scenes and strands of good plays which do not quite, in the end, hold together, but at least this prodigality of material is a fault on the right side.

Next on the horizon are *Ironhand*, a translation-adaptation of Goethe's early play *Goetz von Berlichingen* commissioned by the Stratford Company for the Aldwych, and *The Workhouse Donkey*, a new play which the author describes as 'a vulgar melodrama', for the Royal Court. One thing seems certain, though: difficult though Arden's vision may be to accept on first acquaintance, and puzzling his way of expressing it, familiarity makes the approach much easier and breeds nothing but respect and admiration. John Arden is one of our few complete originals, and for the occasional faults in his plays – a desire to force a gallon into a pint pot, a tendency perhaps to overdo the gusty, gutsy side of things just a little from time to time – there are numerous and irreplaceable merits. Sooner or later his definitive success with a wider public is assured.

OTHER ROYAL COURT DRAMATISTS

THE CONSISTENT CHAMPIONSHIP OF Osborne, Simpson, Arden, and Ann Jellicoe has been the main tangible contribution of the English Stage Company to the progress of the new drama. They may also claim some part in the discovery and promotion of Arnold Wesker, since it was they who passed him on to the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, in the first place, and later it was at the Royal Court that his *Trilogy* found its London home. After these five dramatists, however, there is a considerable diminution of interest among the new dramatists presented for ordinary public performances. The first two discoveries apart from Osborne were both novelists in their forties, Angus Wilson (born 1913) and Nigel Dennis (born 1912), and the dramatic work of both has failed to live up to its initial promise. Angus Wilson's first play, *The Mulberry Bush*, was a subtle and highly literate study of the public benefactor in private life, clearly the work of a novelist rather than a dramatist but effective enough in its own way; two later plays for television, *After the Show* and *The Stranger*, have emphasized the defects of this approach more than the merits. Nigel Dennis's first play, *Cards of Identity*, extracted a lot of intelligent knockabout fun from his novel of the same name; his later play *The Making of Moo*, a satirical history of religion, also had its moments, particularly in the third act, and aroused a surprising amount of outraged objection, but his third work for the theatre, *August for the People*, proved a disappointingly uneven attack on various already well-battered targets, political and social, shifting gears disturbingly in the second act from *The Apple Cart* to *Timon of Athens*.

The younger dramatists brought forward by the Royal Court have also, apart from the 'big five', lacked any very striking attractions. The theatre has provided a home for two or three wandering productions of some interest from elsewhere (Pinter's double bill *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Room* from the Hampstead Theatre Club, touring companies in Shelagh Delaney's *The Lion in Love* and Errol John's lively *Observer*-prize-winning drama of

life among the Caribbean poor, *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*), but on its own account it has produced only six other plays by new dramatists, none worth more than a passing mention. The most famous of them, though by no means the best, Willis Hall's *The Long and the Short and the Tall* is considered elsewhere in this book; it is a variation on the Osborne formula of 'angry' drama concocted by an efficient commercial dramatist, but that is about all. Donald Howarth's *Sugar in the Morning* (which began life as a Sunday-night production-without-décor under the title *Lady on the Barometer*) was really nothing more than a matinée play about a faded-genteel landlady under whose unprepossessing exterior lurks a volcano of frustrated passion waiting to be unleashed about the head of an interfering young doctor who lives in the house, though a certain amount of conscientious outspokenness gave it a mildly contemporary air. Frederick Bland's *The Naming of Murderers' Rock*, a stop-gap also promoted from Sunday night, was an efficient, dead-pan reconstruction of a nineteenth-century murder trial in New Zealand which acquired, in its ruthless objectivity, an almost hallucinatory power, but would not, one suspects, seem particularly striking in another context – say, as a television semi-documentary.

More interesting than these, in that at least they aroused some controversy and split audiences into those who liked them very much and those who did not like them at all, were the two productions with which the left-wing poet Christopher Logue (born 1927) was associated, *Trials by Logue*, a double bill of his one-act plays, and *The Lily-White Boys*, a musical with a book by Harry Cookson (who later disclaimed the result) for which he wrote the lyrics. *The Lily-White Boys* was a rather heavy-handed satire about a bunch of crooks who rise to positions of authority by way of trade unions, psychiatry, the call-girl racket and the beauty contest, and despite Logue's statements about his revolutionary approach to the numbers in a musical as a means of forwarding the story (with Gilbert and Brecht cited as the great originals) it emerged as just another fairly conventional musical about British low-life, at a time when these were quite inescapable on the West End stage. *Trials by Logue* consisted of two trial plays, a very plain and straightforward retelling of the

Antigone story, and *Cob and Leach*, a rough-and-ready farcical parody of it which to some seemed riotously funny, to others merely tedious, according to taste. *Cob and Leach* began, incidentally, as the second half of a Sunday-evening entertainment, with *Jazzetry*, a programme of Logue's experiments in combining spoken verse with an improvised jazz accompaniment along the lines explored by the American Beat poets. Up to now Logue has proved more effective at attracting publicity than as a genuine creator.

Finally, among these Royal Court dramatists, mention must be made of Barry Reckord, a young Jamaican dramatist, born in 1928, whose first play, *Flesh to a Tiger*, was staged at the Royal Court in May 1958. This was a disappointing shanty-town melodrama with too much extraneous local colour and too little working out of loaded situations – a native woman torn between a coloured religious leader and a white doctor ends by being insulted by the doctor, smothering her baby and stabbing the religious leader – in terms of manageable dramatic dialogue. But with his second play, *You in Your Small Corner*, which played one night at the Royal Court and was later revived at the Arts, he showed a considerable advance in dramatic technique, and though there were still certain awkwardnesses in the narration, the story of a group of relatively wealthy West Indians living in Brixton and looking down on their 'low-class' English neighbours had a number of salutary surprises in store for the conventionally minded, while the dialogue was lively and well-written and the characterization wholly convincing.

So much for dramatists introduced in the Royal Court's normal repertory system. But a word must be said about the series of Sunday-night productions-without-décor which have already been frequently referred to in this section. These were started in May 1957 as private performances organized by the English Stage Company's social off-shoot, the English Stage Society, with the idea of trying out new plays which might for various reasons be unsuited, or only doubtfully suited, for full-dress productions, but which were nevertheless worth producing so that the playwright could see them on a stage and their possibilities be assessed (as well as the possibilities of actors and

directors involved in the performances). A number of plays first staged in this way have, in fact, subsequently been given full-scale productions at the Royal Court or elsewhere: *A Resounding Tinkle*, *Sugar in the Morning*, *Cob and Leach*, *The Naming of Murderers' Rock*, and Alun Owen's *Progress to the Park* have all been staged, and Evelyn Ford's *Love from Margaret* turned up later on television as *Hell Hath No Fury*. But there are also a number of plays, and by no means the least interesting, which have never got any further than these Sunday-night private performances, and these deserve some mention at least.

The two most accomplished and individual dramatists by a long way to appear at these performances are Keith Johnstone and Michael Hastings. Keith Johnstone's first play, *Brixham Regatta*, was commissioned by the English Stage Company and with its companion piece *For Children* appeared for a season at the Aldeburgh Festival as well as at the Royal Court. *Brixham Regatta* is an extraordinary and subtle piece about six characters, three of them normal human beings – a showman, his wife and his daughter – and three of them in some way freaks: a cripple, a zombie and a mutilated man. The freaks are in a greater or lesser degree human; they are laboriously pulling themselves up into complete humanity or sliding away from it, rather as in the evolutionary theories elaborated by Macdonald from Novalis, and by their prospective rise and fall we are given in microcosm a picture of what humanity is and what it may be. *For Children* is a two-character play about a boy and girl who discover a skeleton and then use it as a starting-point for their individual flights of imagination (in rather the same way that the passers-by in Simpson's *The Hole* see the hole itself in terms of their own private worlds, though more searchingly and 'psychologically'), while through what they make of the skeleton we learn what to make of them. A year or so later Keith Johnstone was associated with the director William Gaskill in devising a topical improvisation, *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp*, in which a group of actors elaborated without scripts on the official reports of happenings at Hola. This was by general consent a total fiasco, but the interest in improvisation and its possibilities engendered at that time still survives at the Royal

Court and may yet bear fruit. Meanwhile Johnstone has produced little creative work in the last few years which has satisfied his own high standards, and has turned increasingly to direction. It hardly seems likely that he has permanently abandoned play-writing, however, and his return to it is obviously something well worth waiting for.

Michael Hastings, too, seems for the moment to have given up play-writing, and has become involved with the Colin Wilson-Stuart Holroyd group in their more philosophical preoccupations (Colin Wilson, incidentally, had a play rejected by the Royal Court, and Stuart Holroyd's *The Tenth Chance*, another Sunday-night production, turned out to be a totally undramatic piece of pseudo-philosophical argument about a prisoner unable to withstand torture finding, perhaps, salvation through degradation). Hastings's first play, *Don't Destroy Me*, was written when he was 17, in 1955, and was staged at the New Lindsey Club; though visibly uncertain and immature, its picture of a rackety Jewish household in Brixton, with the various emotional entanglements and disagreements among the adults weighing heavily and finally unbearably on the central character, a teenage boy, did indicate the presence of a genuine dramatic talent, as yet unformed and undisciplined. With his second play, *Yes – and After*, produced a year later at the Royal Court, he came of age: in spite of its occasional *longueurs* (even cut down from its original four-and-a-half hours to a more normal length) this was the work of a mature and accomplished dramatist. The central character is a girl of fourteen who has been raped by a lodger; he has gone, but she is still overwhelmed by the experience to the extent of withdrawing completely from human contact. The resolution, when it comes, is worked out in strictly Freudian terms, with a re-enactment of the rape to break the trauma in which the girl is held, but the development of character along the way, particularly that of the parents, is far from this sort of schematization and the dialogue, for the middle-aged as well as the young, has an astonishing ring of unforced truthfulness. Unfortunately those who looked forward on the strength of *Yes – and After* to Hastings's further work in the theatre have up to now been disappointed, possibly because the elephantiasis already

threatening in that work (the heroine, it is recorded, originally had a speech lasting an hour and a half) overcame his next play, which was announced as completed, but does not appear yet to have achieved any sort of performance.

Lastly, there are three women playwrights whose work has been more or less confined to Sunday-night run-throughs: Evelyn Ford, Kathleen Sully, and Kon Fraser. Each has had one play done at the Royal Court, and in each there was something of interest, even if none was a total success. Evelyn Ford's *Love from Margaret* looked at first glance like the updated matinée play the title seems to imply, but actually its exploration of the tensions between a middle-aged couple, the wife with a limitless voracity for love and the husband with an emotional need always to be in the wrong with his wife, was unusually acute, and some of the wife's diatribes struck on a happy vein of angry eloquence. Kathleen Sully's *The Waiting of Lester Abbs* had difficulty with the main character, who is constantly put upon by everyone and treated so consistently as a fool that he finally assumes the blame for a murder he did not commit just to escape, but was terrifyingly observant of those around him. And Kon Fraser's *Eleven Plus*, an odd, rather arbitrary piece of stage-craft about a girl who, in compensation for her feelings of depression over her supposed failure of the eleven-plus examination, builds up for herself a fantasy about her aunt as the prospective virgin mother of a new Messiah, also had its telling moments, though these were rather dimmed by too many glaring irrelevancies.

Of late the Sunday-night shows at the Royal Court seem to have been virtually moribund (it is noticeable that except for *Eleven Plus* all the productions mentioned took place before the beginning of 1960), and perhaps this may portend a slackening off in the flow of new dramatic talent – something which had to come anyway, sooner or later. But even if this is so these programmes have already served their purpose by bringing forward a number of exciting plays which would not, in all probability, have found a home otherwise even in the relatively adventurous repertoire of the Royal Court's normal productions. However, though their very existence helped to keep the Royal Court's reputation as 'the writer's theatre' high, and the English

Stage Company has remained ever since its inception the chief London rallying-point for those seriously interested in drama, the centre of excitement, the place where news was being made most rapidly and loudly, had already moved off eastward before the Sunday-night shows were even thought of. In the direction of Stratford-atte-Bowe, to be precise.

Way Down East

Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop

IF THE ROYAL COURT unmistakably took the lead in the field of new drama with *Look Back in Anger*, it was not long before a rival appeared on the scene; only a fortnight later a new play by a new dramatist was produced at the Theatre Royal, Stratford, which was to create almost as much stir as John Osborne's when it arrived in the West End: *The Quare Fellow*, by Brendan Behan, which opened on 24 May 1956.

At that time Theatre Workshop had not been running so very long in its East London home: after a wandering on-and-off sort of life on tour in Wales, the industrial north and elsewhere since its setting up by Joan Littlewood and a small band of fellow enthusiasts at the end of the war, it had come to rest at Stratford as recently as 1953. Before *The Quare Fellow*, it had produced new plays, of course, but nothing very exciting – mostly a series of political journalistic pieces by Ewen MacColl – and it was generally agreed that its best work was done with classical revivals like *Volpone* or *Edward II* and stagings of modern classics like *The Good Soldier Schweik*. In the next five years it managed an almost unbroken series of transfers to the West End and a generally enthusiastic reception from the Press as a nursery for new writers: after *The Quare Fellow* Behan wrote *The Hostage*, another major dramatist seemed to emerge in Shelagh Delaney, whose first play, *A Taste of Honey*, appeared in May 1958, and there were numerous lesser successes, like *You Won't Always Be On Top*, *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T' Be*, *Make Me an Offer*, *Sparrers Can't Sing*, and others.

Then in 1961 Joan Littlewood announced she was leaving the company for a couple of years at least. Consternation. Indignation. And an amount of publicity in the popular Press which would have been unthinkable over anyone in show business except a major Hollywood star five years previously (a comment, no doubt, on the English stage's increasing reputation meanwhile as a place where things happen and news is made). But to understand precisely why Joan Littlewood's departure should set

up such a violent reaction, one must look a little closer at her company and its policy.

The reputation of being a miracle-worker Joan Littlewood acquired during her eight years' tenancy of the Theatre Royal has not been altogether undeserved, though she herself resents it intensely, feeling that people who spoke in such terms were attributing unfairly to her the tonic qualities which actually came from working with the company as a whole and benefiting from its discipline, its dedication and the hard-won ability of its actors to work self-effacingly as a team. But, however this may be – whether these advantages come directly from Joan Littlewood herself or indirectly from working with the company she has created almost single-handed – there is no denying that many actors and writers have seemed much better when working at Stratford than they ever have again. And where this particularly concerns our present study – in the field of writing – the reasons for this are clear enough. Of all the producers and directors intimately connected with the staging of the new dramatists, Joan Littlewood has had the most far-reaching effect on the actual texts we know on the stage and in volume form.

Her own greatest satisfaction has been drawn from her classical revivals, particularly *Volpone*, and of the new plays she has directed the only one in which she sees real achieved literary quality is *They Might Be Giants*, by the young American writer James Goldman, which was her last production for Theatre Workshop and, critically as well as commercially, one of the least successful. By her own testimony what she was reduced to looking for (not, as hostile critics have sometimes suggested, what she chose to look for) in the texts of new plays sent to her was not a finished, tidy, well-written play, but one with at least some spark of life in it from which something, somehow, might be developed. A finished play which possessed also this quality of life would be the ideal, but since she found it only once, with *They Might Be Giants*, for the rest she had to make do with what offered, choosing the rough but lively in preference to the smooth and lifeless.

Consequently almost every new play which was produced by the company under her rule passed through endless transforma-

tions in rehearsal – so much so that she compares the work of the actors in them to that of the players in the *commedia dell'arte*, working on a basic text but improvising freely around it, sometimes with the author's aid, sometimes without it. Brendan Behan, we are told, was deposited in the pub opposite the theatre while his plays were being rehearsed, with the words pouring out of him and someone ready to note down anything good to cover that weak spot in the second act or replace the 'chunks of terrible sentimentality' which had to be cut from the original text right away. Shelagh Delaney was in attendance during some of the polishing of *A Taste of Honey* after the first performance, by which time most of the major surgery had been carried out, but how far even that was her own work remains obscure (the trouble with trying to find this sort of thing out is that by now frequently neither author, director nor actors can remember precisely who contributed what). Frank Norman accepted the system wholeheartedly and worked out *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T' Be* from a 'strange eighteen-page document' (as Lionel Bart describes the original text) with the actors on the stage of the theatre (thereby anticipating by a year or so William Saroyan's more widely publicized experiment in spontaneous drama with *Sam, the Highest Jumper of Them All* at the same theatre). One or two authors objected to the system, of course: Wolf Mankowitz, the most professional and commercial of them all, frequently found himself challenged to defend what he had originally written in *Make Me An Offer*, on the principle that if he could it stayed in, if he couldn't it went; Marvin Kane, author of *We're Just Not Practical*, went so far as to circularize all the London newspapers disclaiming what actually appeared on the stage as a travesty his original intentions: and when Alun Owen's *Progress to the Park* (admittedly not one of Joan Littlewood's own productions to begin with) arrived in the West End with a different director and a largely different cast all the ill-advised bits of improvised action with which Stratford production had been diversified were quietly abandoned and a return made to the far superior original text.

All this makes the evaluation of the 'Theatre Workshop dramatists' – Behan, Shelagh Delaney, and the several inventors

of material for what Joan Littlewood calls 'our Cockney improvisations' – as independent creators and literary artists extremely difficult. How much is their own work and how much the contribution of actors and director? In the case of *A Taste of Honey* I have been allowed to find out for myself by comparing the original manuscript with the final text, and this at least makes one thing clear; that the (quite considerable) modifications introduced have not violated the spirit of the original or dropped any of the original's good points, while eliminating everything that was undeniably wrong with it to begin with. The only alterations which one might take exception to are the introduction of one or two of those music-hall tricks of presentation – direct addresses to the audience; musical entrances and exits – which have sometimes proved the most tiresome mannerisms of Theatre Workshop directors, Joan Littlewood included. In other words, whoever was most responsible for the revisions has simply arranged things in such a way that the author is shown accurately to the audience, but presented in the best possible light, and, sensibly enough, Shelagh Delaney has found nothing to object to in that. Neither has Brendan Behan, so we may assume that the same is true for him.

The interesting question now, though, is what will happen to them once they are removed from Joan Littlewood's guidance. Her own hope was that working with the company to remove the crudities and errors of their first attempts would teach them lessons for their later work, but she feels that this has not happened. 'God knows what Brendan's next play will be like if I'm not here to make him write it,' she said shortly before leaving, and we know that *A Lion in Love* was rewritten once by Shelagh Delaney in response to her criticisms ('There's too much in it picked up at smart West End parties'), though even so the result is still badly in need of the sort of tightening and sharpening Joan Littlewood achieved with *A Taste of Honey*. The future of Theatre Workshop as we have known it hangs at present in the balance, but so, obviously, does that of its two brightest dramatists, Brendan Behan and Shelagh Delaney, the 'second wave' of the new drama, and undeniably the interest with which one awaits their next works is tinged with a certain foreboding.

BRENDAN BEHAN

AN EXCELLENT CASE COULD be made out, and almost completely sustained, for the complete omission of Brendan Behan from a book on the new British drama. He is in almost every respect foreign and irrelevant: an Irishman among the English (who even writes his plays first in Gaelic), a Catholic among the Protestants, a cat among the pigeons (or perhaps all things considered, a bull in a china shop is nearer the mark), an historical accident. Had he had his first major stage successes on the English-speaking stage in Dublin instead of at Stratford he would have been hailed, no doubt, as a new Sean O'Casey and we could comfortably have left him out of our London-based calculations; had he even become first of all the talk of Paris (like Beckett) or New York there would have been no difficulty. But no: here in London he has had his first, and in many ways his most sympathetic theatrical home, and willy-nilly he must be considered, if only because, like Everest, he is there.

Once we have firmly decided on this, however, it is easy enough to invent spurious reasons and adduce little bits of special pleading for his inclusion. He has been formed, as much as any other writer to lodge in the same stable, by the taste and theatrical flair of Joan Littlewood and the special circumstances in which the company works? Well, yes, that is certainly so. He has contributed to the new British theatrical tradition even if he has not drawn anything worth talking about from the old? More difficult to prove, and the nearest thing to a demonstration, *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be*, only goes to show just how far an English brothel comedy is from its evident Irish model. His roughness, his irreverence, his distaste for any establishment, even the establishment of rebellion, links him with some of the more notable of the new English writers, and makes him spiritually, if not technically, an encouragement and a sign to those who are coming after? That is nearer the mark, and if we look at *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage* as products of the new questioning spirit abroad in Britain we shall not be far from gauging

their real importance in the current revival of the British stage.

Brendan Behan was born in Ireland in 1923, brought up in Dublin and educated by the French Sisters of Charity, joined the I.R.A. in 1937 and was sentenced to three years in Borstal for political offences by a Liverpool Court in 1939. Out of Borstal, he was sentenced again, by a Military Court, in Dublin in 1942, this time for fourteen years, also for political offences, and served nearly six years of his sentence. His first play, *The Quare Fellow*, was written in 1955 and sent finally to Joan Littlewood, who read the first five pages, sent off a telegram at once accepting it, and spent the next few months licking it into shape, tightening, sharpening, eliminating the sentimental passages – all with the help of the author from the safe distance of the pub over the way.

The two most important facts in Behan's life, as far as his work is concerned, are his periods in prison, and his involvement with the I.R.A. The prison part of this, the earlier section of which is recounted at length in his autobiographical volume *Borstal Boy*, forms the background also for *The Quare Fellow*, though here the plot is reduced to a minimum and it is the overall impression of prison life which counts. The moment chosen for this study is that at which the prison is most intensely, self-consciously itself: the night of an execution. Of the two men due to be hanged one, 'Silver-top', a mild-mannered wife-killer, has had his sentence reduced to life imprisonment, but the other, who killed his brother with an axe and dismembered the body (or so we are told) is to have no reprieve, and gradually, little by little, the feeling of intense expectancy settles over the prison as each prisoner in his different way awaits the execution. And not the prisoners alone; there are the warders, too, almost as much prisoners as those they watch over and to whose community they belong much more than to that of the outside world. And the hangman himself, an amiable English publican whom the locals assume to be some sort of commercial traveller.

Gradually we get to know the various inhabitants of the prison. There are the old lags Dunlavin and Neighbour, who know their way round all the dodges of prison life, like swigging meths when the warder is giving them their spirit rub against rheumatism and keeping on the right side of the unctuous visitor

Healey, who comes round to collect their complaints and make suitable note of the righteous for assistance by the charitable organization to which he belongs when they come out. There is the shaken lifer ('Silver-top'), who is so profoundly appalled at the thought of life imprisonment that he tries, shortly after his reprieve, to hang himself in his cell. There are the young prisoners, thinking only of the chance to peek through the window at the 'mots' hanging out the washing in the yard of the next-door women's prison. There is the sex criminal whom Dunlavin thinks is more unpleasant to be housed next to than a good straightforward murderer; there is the boy from the Islands whose main comfort is the possibility of talking to a warder from the Islands in Gaelic; there are prisoners hard and soft, young and old, English and Irish, of every conceivable type, for every conceivable offence.

They are not very precisely individualized, for Behan's style is essentially more narrative than strictly dramatic and he could hardly be farther from psychological drama, but all are observed with a rich, all-embracing humanity which reaches, in fact, far enough to embrace the warders as well, particularly Warder Regan, who seems at several points to be the author's own mouthpiece, especially on the subject of capital punishment. The key passage in this connexion, and indeed the key to the method of the play as a whole, comes in an exchange in the last act between Regan and the Chief Warder, discussing arrangements for looking after the condemned man during the night:

CHIEF: Is there anything on the practical side we could send down?

REGAN: A bottle of malt.

CHIEF: Do you think he'd drink it?

REGAN: No, but I would.

CHIEF: Regan, I'm surprised at you.

REGAN: I was reared among people that drank at a death or prayed. Some did both. You think the law makes this man's death something different, not like anyone else's. Your own, for instance.

CHIEF: I wasn't found guilty of murder.

REGAN: No, nor no one is going to jump on you in the morning and throttle the life out of you, but it's not him I'm thinking of. It's myself. And you're not going to give me that stuff about

just shoving over the lever and bob's your uncle. You forget the times the fellow gets caught and has to be kicked off the edge of the trap hole. You never heard of the warders down below swinging on his legs the better to break his neck, or jumping on his back when the drop was too short.

CHIEF: Mr Regan, I'm surprised at you.

REGAN: That's the second time tonight.

There in a nutshell is the principle on which the piece is built; in prison, even when an execution is imminent, comedy and tragedy are inextricably mixed, as everywhere else in life, and the *memento mori* is seldom without its gruesome humour. Murder is horrible, and legalized murder, in cold blood, with the best of intentions, is even more horrible, but the direct attack is not always the most effective, and Behan invites us not only to pray at this funeral, but to drink as well, to laugh and shout and sing as well as to weep and wail and shudder. His theme, basically, is the inalienable dignity of man – inalienable, that is, in that nobody can take it away from him except himself – and the fact that he chooses his examples from what would normally, with some reason, be regarded as the dregs of humanity makes the lesson all the more potent. A note in the programme said: 'This is not a play about prisons, but a play about people.'

The play, as finally staged, is not only vividly alive from moment to moment (the brimming life of the Irish popular speech is a great help here, especially for an English audience, but everything seems to suggest that it is also selected for its particular dramatic purposes with considerable skill), but also it has a finely coherent overall structure, in which the absence of conventional plot development is to a large extent compensated for by the skill in which the various themes are brought to the fore, held in the background, or ingeniously woven together as the play progresses, linking scene with scene and establishing a gradual, orderly progression to the inevitable end within the framework provided by the recurrent refrain of a song from an unseen prisoner doing solitary in the basement.

On the whole these qualities do not occur in Behan's second play *The Hostage*, though they are replaced by others which, to first acquaintance at least, may seem almost as satisfactory. In

The Quare Fellow the tragic undertones are always present, and though they are seldom insisted on we are conscious throughout of a sensation in the comedy akin to that of dancing on a coffin-lid. In *The Hostage*, however, though the underlying tragic theme is still there, there are whole stretches in which it is thrust altogether out of sight and rather wild, uncontrolled, and in some cases essentially irrelevant bouts of farcical humour take its place ('Brendan would drop his trousers in church for a laugh,' says a friend resignedly). Ultimately, in fact, the second play is far less disciplined than the first; at times it looks like going off the rail altogether in its quest for the easy laugh or the rather facile shock effect, and the wholesale introduction of music-hall techniques, direct addresses to the audience, songs with self-conscious cues to the accompanist in the orchestra pit, even a bit of dialogue ribbing the author ('That is, if the bleeding thing has an author'), savours at times of the self-indulgence inherent in all thoroughgoing 'director's theatre'.

Now as this is something, to be fair, that Joan Littlewood has not elsewhere been guilty of, we might assume fairly safely some imperative necessity for these covering-up operations in the original script, and so in fact it proves. *The Hostage* began life as a play in Gaelic (written for the Gaelic League) at about a third the length we know it now, and in its first English version it consisted in effect of three long, barely connected scenes in Behan's most discursive narrative style: Act I – a dialogue between Pat and Meg on the subject of 'Monsewer', the old and eccentric rebel-by-conviction, with occasional side references to the recent history of Ireland, almost any line in which could be assigned to either speaker; Act II – an extended love scene between the hostage and the maid, very rambling; Act III – the raid. Thus while *The Quare Fellow* in rehearsal went mainly through a process of tightening and compression (with a certain amount of redistribution of dialogue to break up the heavier chunks of narrative), with *The Hostage* two potentially contradictory processes were required at the same time; the strengthening throughout of the main narrative line, and the extensive opening-out and diversification of the action with new characters and new sub-plots to fill the play out and give it more dramatic

interest. And though on the whole the first aim is achieved (by comparison, at least, with the first draft), the second has also been achieved with a vengeance, so that the minor characters and their business often seem in danger of making us forget the central matter of the play altogether.

The subject of *The Hostage* is drawn from that other side of Behan's life we have referred to, his experience with the I.R.A., and in some respects the play's conclusions are not unlike the despairing final appeal in his brother Dominic's otherwise far less interesting play *Posterity Be Damned*: 'Mother Ireland, get off my back.' The time is now, however many years after the Troubles 'now' may be, and yet still over it all looms the great shadow of national triumphs and disasters in 1916. 'What were you doing in the Troubles?' is the constant refrain, even though by now the answer is generally 'But I wasn't even born then', and officially life is still being lived at a fever-pitch of warlike patriotic fervour. But times have changed; the house that was once the refuge of heroes is now a brothel, the I.R.A. has been taken over by fresh-faced young men, the 'earnest religious-minded ones' who have replaced the 'laughing boys' of the great days, and nobody except the thoroughly indoctrinated quite remembers who was on whose side and why, exactly, the heroes kept on the run for more than twenty years.

For a while it seems as if all may at last be made plain when a clear-cut issue is presented: an 18-year-old-boy is sentenced to die in the morning for killing an Ulster policeman, and while he awaits execution in Belfast jail the I.R.A. take a hostage, an ordinary English soldier kidnapped while leaving a dance, and bring him to lodge in the brothel as the last place anyone would dream of looking. They will kill him, they say, if the Irish boy is executed; the threat may be bluff, as the brothel-keeper and some of the girls (male and female) try comfortingly to tell him, or they may really mean it, as he persists in believing. Finally, after a lot of horseplay and a fair amount of horse-sense, the old man in the fifth-floor back, Mullerdy, appears in his true colours as a secret policeman, there is a raid, and in the confusion the soldier is shot after all. No point has been made, no victory won; the whole thing has been bungled, pointless and futile – like, Behan

appears to imply, the general situation of Ireland today, too tied up in considerations of what Queen Victoria did or did not do and who did what forty-five years ago ever to move on into the modern world, to realize that the H bomb makes the I.R.A. out of date, like the R.A.F., the Swiss Guards, the Foreign Legion, the Red Army, and the rest.

All this is clear enough – it is stated more directly than anything in *The Quare Fellow* so that there shall be no mistake – and the scenes which contribute to expression of the play's central theme, particularly those in which the rakish old one-legged ex-I.R.A. brothel-keeper Pat explains recent history to his stupid almost-wife Meg or clashes with the priggish young officer ('Have you got your initials mixed up? Is it the I.R.A. or the F.B.I. that you are in?'), and the gentle encounters between the soldier Leslie and the maid Teresa, both orphans who do not really understand what is going on in the world about them, all work very well. But there are other elements, such as those involving the 'girls' and their farcical encounters, the homosexuals Princess Grace and Rio Rita, and the slightly crazed old 'sociable worker' Miss Gilchrist, with her drink and her malapropisms, which seem, once the first entertainment at their antics has passed, to be merely indulgences in raffish and extravagant local colour calculated to *épater les bourgeois*, which tend in the long run to weaken the play by diluting its effects with too many irrelevances.

For this reason *The Hostage*, even if it does, as Kenneth Tynan remarked, 'send language out on a swaggering spree, ribald, flushed, and spoiling for a fight', appears finally, for all its surface pleasures and occasional deeper insights, a far less substantial and effective play than *The Quare Fellow*, and one rather fears that the wide initial encouragement Behan received as a result of it to rant and roar, to make us laugh instead of being serious (rather than, as in *The Quare Fellow*, when at his most serious of all), and to be as much of a wild Irish 'character' on stage as he was known to be in his not-so-private life, may turn out in the long run to have set him off in quite the wrong direction. Obviously he could, if he so wished, go on pouring out this sort of thing, more or less shaped into plays, until Doomsday,

which, if this were all he had to offer, would be acceptable enough. But in *The Quare Fellow* he showed he had more, and so he did in *The Hostage*, even if it sometimes looked in danger of drowning in a sea of swirling words.

His most recently published work is a short radio play called *The Big House*, originally written for the stage in 1958. It concerns the looting of an Irish country house just after the Troubles, and is dullish and more than a little incoherent, though it is too slight to draw any conclusions from. But his next play, *Richard's Cork Leg*, may prove decisive, especially as Joan Littlewood will not be there to see it safely to the stage and he will be for the first time out on his own. Then we shall be able, perhaps, to find out whether it was her influence, and that of the company as a whole, which led him partially astray in *The Hostage* (it was produced, after all, at the height of their 'music-with-everything' phase) or whether, given that the original script needed some drastic alteration, he went astray of his own accord when the discipline exerted on *The Quare Fellow* was relaxed. Or perhaps we won't. Either way, though, in *The Quare Fellow* we have something very like a masterpiece, and for that, however it came we should be duly grateful.

SHELAGH DELANEY

SURELY NO DRAMATIST CAN ever have got farther on a smaller body of work than Shelagh Delaney. She is one of the three or four names in the new drama that everyone has heard of, she has achieved a considerable reputation with the critics and the theatre-going public, high sales with published texts and in one case a prompt film adaptation right on the heels of long and successful runs in the West End and on Broadway. And yet she is now just 23, and she has written only two plays, the second a commercial and for the most part a critical flop. Her future career remains the big question-mark in the English theatrical scene; it is quite possible that she will never again live up to the achievement of her first play, *A Taste of Honey*, and after her second, *The Lion in Love*, a number of commentators were quite ready to write this off as a freak success. Too ready, perhaps, for despite its obvious weaknesses and overall inferiority to *A Taste of Honey*, *The Lion in Love* does show in certain respects an advance on the first, and may well prove to be a transitional work. Anyway, with an author of 23 it is early days to make any sweeping judgement.

Shelagh Delany was born and brought up in the industrial town of Salford, Lancashire. A late developer, she failed her 11-plus and went to a local secondary modern school. Later, there was talk of transferring her to a grammar school, but by that time she had lost any academic ambitions she might have had and left school at 16. With no special qualifications, she took what jobs offered, working for a while in an engineering factory, and at the age of 17 began work on *A Taste of Honey*. Why a drama, rather than a novel or poetry? Because, according to her own account, she saw Rattigan's *Variation on a Theme* on tour and thought that if this was drama, she could do better herself. Unlike many other people who have thought the same, however, she set about doing something practical to find out whether she could or not, and the result was *A Taste of Honey*.

Judgement of the play as it originally left its 18-year-old

author's hands has been complicated, of course, by the fact that it was accepted for production at Theatre Workshop and went through the process of adaptation and elaboration which is usual there. Shelagh Delaney was not present until nearly the final run-through (when, it is recorded, she noticed no differences until they were pointed out to her), and by then most of the major alterations had been made, though further modifications continued to be made right up to the West End opening (including a new, softened conclusion insisted on by the West End manager). Since the play as acted and published is, after all, our prime concern here, I shall write mainly about that version, but I have been able, through the kindness of Joan Littlewood, to read the original script, and I shall give some account of it, for interest's sake and, incidentally, because it helps to clarify the answers to some puzzling questions about Joan Littlewood's production methods and Shelagh Delaney's potential staying-power.

The Stratford production as it finally emerged was in Joan Littlewood's characteristic manner, a sort of magnified realism in which everything is like life but somehow larger than life. This method kept intact the realistic core of the play – the important relationships between mother and daughter and between daughter and homosexual art student – and also helped to carry one over doubts about the two other characters, the negro sailor and the mother's new husband. The plot is simple enough. Helen, a feckless prostitute (or nearly) and her schoolgirl daughter Josephine, move into a comfortless attic flat in a slum, but Helen soon decides to marry her latest friend Peter and leaves; Josephine falls into the arms of a negro sailor. When we next meet her she is pregnant, and being looked after by Geoffrey, a motherly art student who bustles round keeping the place tidy and making little garments for the baby, but this idyll is interrupted by the return of Helen, whose marriage is not working out, and who has consequently decided that her place is with her daughter. Geoffrey leaves.

Told thus baldly there sounds to be little to the play, and indeed in conventional terms there is little: it has no 'ideas' which can be isolated and considered as such apart from their dramatic

context, and if one tries to read the play away from the theatre, without attributing to its characters the *personae* of the actors who originally played them, it is virtually non-existent. One does not even notice the improbabilities of the men, Peter in particular (is he a serious George Sanders-style world-weary charmer or merely a phony with a shaky accent and a shady past?), because all the characters seem equally shadowy. And yet in the theatre the whole thing works, and works almost infallibly – it has the unique power of holding us simply as a tale that is told, and the words the characters are given to speak take on, when spoken, a strange independent life of their own. A lot of it, admittedly, is in any case very funny: one thinks of Helen gazing thoughtfully at her unpromising urchin of a daughter and wondering if she could turn her into ‘a mountain of voluptuous temptation’, or Jo, remarking wryly of Peter’s suggestion that she should give Helen an engagement ring ‘I should have thought their courtship had passed the stage of symbolism’ (it is humour in the music-hall style, of course, and therefore particularly sympathetic to the Theatre Workshop atmosphere).

But more than that, it has – such of it as concerns Jo and Helen at least – the disturbing ring of truth about it: the two characters individually, and the relationship between them, are completely believable, though their situation must surely be exceptional to the point of uniqueness, even if it is not completely impossible. There is more than first meets the eye in Jo’s assertion that she is contemporary – ‘I really do live at the same time as myself, don’t I?’ She accepts life, as it is, without looking for a loophole in time or place: even when she takes an exotic lover it is for here and now, not as a way out (and anyway he proves to come from Cardiff); she makes no attempt to move away from the squalid flat in its squalid area when her mother has gone, and does not even want to go to hospital to have her baby. Her only moments of rebellion, when she announces that she does not want to be a woman, or have the child, are over almost before they have begun. Helen, too, is in her way a realist: she will try various means of escape, but never with any great conviction that they will work, and when things go wrong, as with her marriage, she is not really surprised.

They accept their life and go on living, without making any too serious complaint about their lot; unlike Jimmy Porter and his followers, Jo is not angry, nor does she rail savagely and ineffectually against the others – authority, the Establishment, fate. In practice, she recognizes that her fate is in her own hands, and takes responsibility for the running of her own life without a second's thought – indeed, in almost every way the action might be taking place before the Welfare State was invented. And this is perhaps a clue to the almost dreamlike effect the play has in performance. None of the characters looks outward at life beyond the closed circle of the stage world; they all live for and in each other, and finally all the rest, even Helen, seem to exist only as incidentals in Jo's world, entering momentarily into her dream of life and vanishing when they have no further usefulness for it.

(It may be remarked, parenthetically, that this effect, along with much else, is lost in the 1961 film version, scripted by Shelagh Delaney in collaboration with the director, Tony Richardson. Here the treatment is uncompromisingly realistic and exterior, and consequently the script-writers find themselves trapped into devoting an excessive amount of time to useless illustration and explanation. Not only do we see Jo in the real world outside – at school; working, surprisingly efficiently, in the shoe shop – but we have to be present at her first encounter with Peter and see how, exactly, she falls out with him (during a trip to Blackpool), to be shown in detail how she gets involved with the coloured sailor and, later, her first meetings with Geoffrey and the circumstances in which he comes to share her flat. In the process, the special quality the play has of just letting things happen, one after another (like in a dream) disappears and modifications clearly intended to strengthen the material succeed, paradoxically enough, only in making it seem thinner and more contrived.)

The big question which has puzzled critics, of course, is how much of all this was present in the play as originally written by Shelagh Delaney. Well, interestingly enough, the author's original typescript turns out, on inspection, to be not so radically different from the version finally performed as most published



4a. Arnold Wesker



b. John Arden



c. Ann Jellicoe



d. N. F. Simpson



5. 'The Happy Haven'

comment on the subject would lead one to believe. The dialogue throughout has been pruned and tightened – rather more, evidently, than is usual in rehearsal – but most of the most celebrated lines are already there (except, oddly, Jo's famous definition of contemporaneity, 'I really do live at the same time as myself, don't I?') and the character of Jo, the play's *raison d'être* is already completely created and unmistakably the same. The principal differences there are concern the character of Peter and the ending, though there is some reshuffling of scenes in Act I (in which, originally, the second scene between Jo and the coloured sailor came after Helen's departure) and Act II, where the present single visit of Helen and Peter to Jo and Geof was originally two separate visits, one by Helen alone and the other by Helen and Peter.

There are also one or two significant deletions. In the first act Helen tells Peter as well as Jo the story of her brief romance with the idiot who fathered Jo, and he takes it quite seriously (nor does Geof later pour cold water on it). She also has one or two elaborate flights of rhetoric about Life and Death which have subsequently been suppressed, in the interests, presumably, of consistent characterization. Geof, too, has his big speech of self-revelation at the beginning of the second act, explaining how he took to men because he wanted a girl so much but was too unattractive for them to take any notice of him, which has later disappeared in the general toning-down of references to his homosexuality.

But the most far-reaching changes are those concerning Peter's character and the end of the play. Peter originally is a complete 17-year-old's dream figure of cosmopolitan sophistication, speaking throughout in a style of intricately throwaway cynicism. In the second act, however (in which, incidentally, his marriage to Helen seems to be working out quite satisfactorily), he reveals a child-loving heart of gold beneath the cynical exterior when, in an extraordinary scene just before he and Helen visit Jo, he suggests that they should take on the baby, and Jo, too, if she will come!

And this, ultimately, is what looks like happening. Where in the final version Geof just reminds Jo lightly of his earlier

proposal of marriage, in the original he has a long and impassioned declaration and is rejected, after which Helen comes, ready to see to everything and take Jo back to her and Peter's home after the baby is born. Jo is carried off to hospital while Geof is out and when he returns he has a longish exchange with Helen, which ends with his resigning himself to the fact that Jo will go back to her mother once the baby is born, and being left alone in the flat holding the doll, the nearest he will ever get to having a child of his own, as the curtain falls.

The play is obviously much superior in its final version, but it is not so different, and the only modifications which one might find out of keeping are very minor: the introduction of a few lines addressed, music-hall style, straight at the audience, and the slight fantastication involved in having the characters dance on and off to music. But essentially the process of communal revision has served (and here the true genius of Joan Littlewood as a director emerges) to bring out the best in the author's work while staying completely true to its spirit.

Even in its final form, the play is still intensely introspective, still very much the acting out in dramatic terms of a young girl's fantasies, and extraordinary achievement as it remains, the perceptive critic of the day might be pardoned for wondering what would happen when its author, like her own central character, opted for adult life and moved out from her own world of fantasy into the real world about her. In the circumstances *The Lion in Love*, though by no means totally successful, or even as successful as *A Taste of Honey*, is a remarkably encouraging sign. Its scope is much wider than that of the earlier play; it has more characters, a more diffuse action, and the central character is now a mature woman, instead of a girl just emerging from childhood. For though the relationship between Peg and her drunken mother Kit is in some ways similar to that between Jo and Helen, there is no doubt this time that the mother is the centre of interest, and the world outside Peg's own private world breaks in with a vengeance instead of being kept discreetly at a distance. The plot, such as it is, concerns a number of possibilities, some of which are resolved in action while others are left hanging. Peg decides to marry her Glaswegian dress-designer boy friend,

her brother Banner decides to go to Australia, their father nearly, but not quite, decides to leave Kit for the prosperous and eager Cross-Lane Nora, but cannot finally resolve himself to it, and Andy, part-time pimp and friend of the family, plans to go into show business again, but gives up the idea.

While in *A Taste of Honey* the essence of the piece lies primarily in what happens to Jo, here the action counts for virtually nothing: rather do the fragments of plot serve as an excuse for us to examine these people, to see how they live together and to try and understand why they are as they are as we follow them through a few inconclusive weeks of their life. For the first time the author tries to offer some explanation: where *A Taste of Honey* really gave us little chance to speculate on the reasons for what we saw, *The Lion in Love* proclaims even by its title that its intentions are more far-reaching and ambitious. For the reference is to the fable of Aesop in which a lion falls in love with a forester's daughter and allows the forester to remove all his defences as a condition of the marriage – after which, of course, he has his brains beaten out for his pains, the moral being 'Nothing can be more fatal to peace than the ill-assorted marriages into which rash love may lead'.

The ill-assorted marriage here is that of Frank and Kit, which is tearing them both apart but keeps them trapped together in a bond of pity and desperation. Kit drinks in her misery and once unsuccessfully attempted suicide, but feels in general 'What good does regretting do? We've just got to make the best of a bad job, haven't we?' Frank, who tells Kit at one point that he has regretted marrying her every day of his life, and believes that if 'it was a pretty poor bargain all round, I got the worst of it, didn't I?' (he married her when they discovered she was pregnant) dreams of escape with Nora, but finds that he cannot make the clean break he wants with Kit whatever he does and returns home at the last.

The relationship between them rings completely true and the character of Frank in particular is perhaps the first really believable man Shelagh Delaney has created. The other principal male, however, the ebullient dress-designer Loll, is not at all convincing, and his romance with the thoroughly real and down-to-earth

Peg is consequently one of the weakest elements in the piece. Its chief weakness, however, is not in either the characterization or the plotting, but in the quality of the dialogue the characters are given to speak. One would not question Shelagh Delaney's ear, which seems, as far as a non-Salfordian can judge, impeccable, nor her skill in noting down precisely what she hears, but in this play her critical sense and her ability to select seem at times to have deserted her. A lot of the writing here not only seems like the small change of unintelligent everyday conversation, but actually is just that, virtually untouched by the dramatist's art. It needs thickening in some way – the close-ups of television would help, or the sort of elucidatory narration in which a novel would embed it – but as it stands it makes quite unfair demands on the actors. Take the character of the old grandfather Jesse, with his seemingly endless fund of worn and featureless traditional sayings: if he is meant to be lovable and 'real' the actor must work overtime to make him so, with virtually no aid from the dramatist, who has simply made him as boring as such a person would be in real life to someone with whom he did not share a history of affectionate regard. Or again, take the character of Kit herself. She is believable, completely believable, and Patricia Burke's playing of her in the Royal Court production was emotionally dead on centre, and yet somehow she failed to come over from the stage as a living character simply because the actress's accent was wrong – a small enough thing in the ordinary way and one which one learns to disregard after an initial adjustment (the television production of Alun Owen's *After the Funeral* afforded a perfect example of the process). But here the accent proved crucial, and it seems reasonable to suppose that a characterization which depends for its success or failure entirely on so tenuous a consideration must have something wrong with it.

What can we expect next from Shelagh Delaney? If she can combine the skill in handling dialogue and the compact construction finally achieved in her first play with the wider field of reference and the new penetration of character revealed in her second, the result should be pretty remarkable. But in what mode will it be? Rumour has it that she is working on a play set in

fifteenth-century Derby, which would be an interesting deviation from the modern world and the kitchen sink. In any case, a move away from realism seems on the cards for her. Elements of dream and song were already present in *A Taste of Honey*: there is Jo's dream ('I was standing in a garden and there were some policemen digging and guess what they found planted under a rosebush – you!'), Helen's dreamlike recollection of Shining Clough, and the strangely moving scene in which Jo and Geof, two children forced to grow up before their time, exchange nursery rhymes. In *The Lion in Love* the elements are even more prominent: Jesse's song 'Winter's coming in, my lass,' closely precedes the final curtain, and even more significantly, Peg's long fairy tale brings down the curtain of act two on a totally unexpected note of poetry. This last is an interesting document altogether:

It happened a long time ago. The weather was fine and there was plenty of food and good beer to drink. There was a country and like all good countries it had a King. He wasn't a bad old stick either, as Kings go, and his Queen was a good-looking woman. So, he did his Kinging in the daytime and his Queening in the night and everything passed off very pleasant for everyone concerned. But like all good things it had to come to an end, and soon the King went off to war and the Queen was left on her own for years. And naturally enough she got a bit fed up with it, and one night when she was in bed she heard the West Wind knocking on her bedroom door. Well, she knew what he was after all right, but she let him in all the same, and soon after he'd whispered a few sweet nothings in her ear she succumbed to his passion and one thing led to another and when she woke up next morning she found she was pregnant. So – the West Wind carried her off to his palace and when her husband came back from the wars and found out that she'd buzzed off he was very upset. Anyway, after a bit he got angry and he snatched a thunderbolt out of the sky and threw it and he followed it to the place where it had landed, but his wife wasn't there. So he did the same thing again and again until he arrived at the palace. Well, by this time the West Wind had got a bit fed up with the Queen and he'd left her flat, her and her baby, and when the Queen realized that her husband the King had caught up with her she felt so ashamed of herself that she ran away with her child and jumped off the edge of the world, straight into the sea. And as soon as she touched the water she was changed into a great rock.

The elements of the situation in the play (an illegitimate baby, an ill-matched coupling, a desertion) recur here confused and transformed as though in a dream, and the result is a completely adult fairy story in which, as in life, there is no simple happy ending. The ability to transmute reality into this sort of myth, powerful even if only half-apprehended, is not one we would have necessarily expected to find in the author of *A Taste of Honey*, and apart from this instance it is not enough used in *The Lion in Love*. But if Shelagh Delaney were ever to give it free rein, putting the qualities we already know she possesses to work in the creation of the new piece, what a play we might have then! Time alone will show whether she can do this, or indeed whether she will ever want to. But then at 23 one has all the time in the world.

WOLF MANKOWITZ AND THE COCKNEY IMPROVISERS

THERE IS NOT MUCH point in detailed discussion of the other dramatists brought forward by Theatre Workshop, since they have all, with one exception, been in the main the authors only of the basic outline on which the company and director have constructed a play, though only one of them appears to have been at all dissatisfied with the result (he disowned 'his' play loudly to the popular Press as having no noticeable connexion with what he had originally written, although, like most Theatre Workshop authors, he was present during rehearsals).

The exception is Wolf Mankowitz, the only established professional writer amid the Sunday dramatists. His musical version of his novel *Make Me an Offer*, staged at Stratford in 1959, stands rather aside from the company's usual work in that it is clearly written rather than made up and that there was little about either the cast, the production or the play itself which would have seemed at all exceptional had it come from an ordinary West End commercial management: it is a slight, quite agreeable fantasy about a young antique dealer's loss of innocence and acquisition of a lock-up shop in the Portobello Road, with songs in the conventional West End manner by Monty Norman and David Heneker. And though Mankowitz was born in the East End in 1925 of Russian Jewish parents, he belongs by education (he read English at Cambridge and became an authority on wedgwood china) and by natural inclination much more to Shaftesbury Avenue, where, actually or metaphorically, most of his works have been produced. Among them are another musical with Norman and Heneker, *Expresso Bongo*, about Soho life on the fringes of show business, and yet another *Belle – or the Ballad of Dr Crippen* (based on a treatment by Beverley Cross and with songs this time by Norman alone) in which the story of Dr Crippen was told, ingeniously if not altogether successfully, in terms of the Edwardian music-hall.

Mankowitz's best works probably remain his first two plays,

The Bespoke Overcoat, a one-act adaptation of Gogol's story about a downtrodden little man's posthumous revenge on authority, first seen at the Arts in 1953, and *The Boychick*, another evocation of Jewish folk and Jewish life, in which an old actor and his son dream, equally ineffectually, of reopening the derelict theatre which was the scene of the actor's greatest triumphs. But since then Mankowitz has become, as well as a successful commercial playwright, a highly paid screenwriter adapting his own work (*A Kid for Two Farthings*) and other people's (*The Millionairess*), and a theatrical impresario; the simplicity and truth of *The Bespoke Overcoat* are by now, it seems, gone quite beyond recall.

The most successful, from every point of view, of the Cockney improvisations proper is *Fings Ain't Wot they Used T' Be*, a musical about Soho low-life by Frank Norman (author, like Behan, of a prison autobiography, *Bang to Rights*), with songs by Lionel Bart (another young East Ender later to achieve a great West End success with *Oliver*, a strikingly resourceful musical adaptation of *Oliver Twist* for which he wrote the book as well as the lyrics and music). This was gradually elaborated from a scruffy eighteen-page outline to the sleek and long-running show familiar to West End audiences, and on the whole it deserved its success, providing as it did the pretext for one of Joan Littlewood's best productions, all colour, movement, and controlled exuberance. The book itself is one of the weaker elements, however; though the surface view of 'brasses' and their menfolk in darkest Soho, with its extravagant argot and grotesque characterization, is fascinating, as the evening progressed the play did not, and one noticed that the constant busy-ness of the stage picture did not quite disguise a couple of slow patches in the second act. Still, on its own level of undemanding popular entertainment, just saucy enough in its exotic background of a Soho 'spieler' and its nostalgia for the good old bad old days (a little too saucy, indeed, for the Lord Chamberlain), the show was an undoubted success, and there is little point in taking it any more seriously than that.

Another improvisation along rather the same lines was Stephen Lewis's *Sparrers Can't Sing*, a lackadaisical picture of Stepney life revolving round the return from jail after nearly ten

years of the paterfamilias to meet again the wife he hit with a poker. There was no plot to speak of, but the characters who wandered in and out, particularly the two old derelicts locked in deadly combat with the National Assistance, made pleasant enough company while they were around and lent a certain colour to the assertion by their ex-electrician's mate creator that 'The world as seen through the bottom of a pint pot is much more entertaining than that usually seen through opera glasses, and less distorted'. So much could hardly be said for the American Marvin Kane's *We're Just Not Practical* (the subject of the author's repudiation) which failed to wring more than the merest drop of humour from the situation of a poor young couple who find rent-free accommodation in a boiler-house while the husband writes a television play, despite the frantic efforts of the cast, who were credited with collectively adapting it from the author's television original.

Finally, and more interestingly, there is Henry Chapman's *You Won't Always Be On Top* (1957), a shapeless but lively slice of working life on a building site. 'Working', actually, is hardly the *mot juste*, since as it happens these workmen do little for most of the time except shirk, speculate on the winner of the 2.30, and await, rather apathetically, the arrival of a union man to organize them and set up a bonus scheme. Nothing much happens in conventional dramatic terms: a new workman arrives; the others are worried or cheery, mild or belligerent, with no cut-and-dried reasons given; conversations spring up from nothing and die away with equal speed; and occasionally characters burst into more or less relevant song in a variety of near-folksong and semi-blues styles. But at least the play steers clear of dullness, largely by the acute ear of the author (or his actors, or both) for the ordinary speech of ordinary people (Chapman who came to the drama late, having his first play produced at the age of 47, had in fact worked for some time as a building labourer), though as usual in this sort of theatre, the employers and their minions – architect, clerk of works, etc. – are portrayed with less verisimilitude than the employed: not only are they parodied, which is fair enough and livens things up, but they are parodied too childishly and inaccurately to make any real point.

In other respects, however, the play deviates agreeably from strict orthodoxy: the caricature of union representatives and union business is nearer the mark, and more attention has clearly been paid to individual human natures than to doctrinaire principles. A later play, *On the Wall*, produced one Sunday night in 1960 without décor at the Royal Court, shows the same qualities and the same defects (the latter rather accentuated in a less accomplished production): it all takes place among workmen shoring up an East Coast sea-wall with sandbags during the 1953 floods, and the basic themes of the first play – loyalty to and betrayal of the group, the inevitable separation of those in any sort of authority from those over whom they exercise it – all recur in very similar surroundings. Again there is no plot to speak of, though the disconnected snatches of conversation do finally resolve themselves into a sort of action when the Guv'nor's wallet disappears and an ambitious ganger hands over a light-fingered old workman to the police, winning by this piece of 'treachery' the coveted position of foreman.

There seems little likelihood that Chapman will develop further, or indeed that he has any more to say; his latest piece, *That's Us*, though it has its moments of excellent mimicry, is really only a réchauffée of elements from the other two, showing a day in the life of a group of workmen on an urban building site. But at least in these three plays he does show himself, as Laurence Kitchen has remarked, that exceptional phenomenon in the modern theatre, a genuine primitive.

EAST END ANNEXE: BERNARD KOPS, HENRY LIVINGS

IT MAY SEEM PERVERSE to include in the section devoted to Theatre Workshop two playwrights whose work has never been produced by the company and whose connexion with it, in the first case at least, is extremely tenuous. The only external justification for putting Bernard Kops here is that his first play, *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*, was once intended for production at Stratford, but in fact it finally reached the stage at the Oxford Playhouse, and his subsequent plays have turned up in such improbable places for a dramatist with primarily working-class interests as the Edinburgh Festival, Guildford, Cambridge A.D.C., and the Arts. By rights, no doubt, he should figure among those whose major opportunities have been found in the Provinces, and yet in a curious way it is with Stratford E. more than anywhere else that he seems naturally to belong.

Partly this is a matter of background and subject-matter: Kops was born in Stepney in 1928 of a working-class Jewish family, left school at the age of thirteen and drifted from job to job until he decided he wanted to write, producing a number of poems, later collected into two volumes, a novel and several radio scripts before he settled decisively to writing for the stage. His first play, *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*, was written in 1956, and, like all his other plays to a certain extent, it draws its material from the Jewish life and folklore he knew as a child in the East End. Not only that, but like the majority of Theatre Workshop plays its development is rather free and arbitrary, suggesting often inspired improvisation more than careful literary craftsmanship; the style is basically simple and unsophisticated – in many ways Kops also remains something of a primitive – and the characters have a habit of speaking in asides to the audience and bursting from time to time into song.

The central character of *The Hamlet of Stepney Green* is David Levy, a dreamy young man with an urge to croon. This character, more or less, recurs in all Kops's plays, along with the

Oedipal situation in which he is enmeshed; all Kops's heroes are tied emotionally to their mothers and all are dreamers obsessed with some fixed idea. In only one case does the dream show signs of winning out (*Change for the Angel*), but elsewhere Kops seems to advocate coming to terms with the realities of normal human life and recognizing that dreams may be delusions which prevent one from seeing the truth instead of insights into the truth denied to more mundane creatures. In this conclusion he avoids one sentimental stereotype, the dreamer-poet-rebel who is an unacknowledged legislator of mankind, only to fall into another: reliance on the good sense and solid values of warm-hearted, simple people to pull us through. Given this tendency, though (which in a primitive is not hard to accept, since one does not expect a sophisticated or subtly reasoned world-picture), it may be felt that Kops's work is at its best when it is most unashamedly simple and sentimental, as in *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*, rather than when, as in one or two of his later plays, he tries to reason and philosophize.

In *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*, fortunately, there is almost no overt philosophizing at all. In the first act Sam Levy is dying, though as he has been dying so often before and recovered no one takes very much notice. As he looks back over his life he finds it unsatisfactory and realizes that he has been poisoned by his own life (or, in a sense, by his wife, since she was his life). His son David overhears him rambling and, taking only what he wants to hear, assumes that his mother has poisoned his father and revenge must be exacted. In the second act, which begins immediately after Sam's funeral, Sam reappears, an amiable ghost, in response, he says, to some unvoiced need of David's; only David can see and hear him. He tries to curb David's enthusiasm for revenge, but David will not listen; when he sees that his mother is likely to remarry a widowed neighbour, Mr Segal, he reaches a state of mania in which he dresses in black, teddy-boy style, to simulate his model, Hamlet, and is taken for mad by his relatives and the chorus of three salesmen (two start selling tombstones and one insurance, but they keep changing jobs). Sam realizes that, in fact, his wife's remarriage is the best solution, and, persuading David that this is all part of the revenge

(as, in a different sense, it may be), he engineers it through a seance. In the last act, after the mother's remarriage, Sam gives David a love potion pretending it is a poison, and everyone who drinks it is suffused with love and good nature. David does not drink it, but suddenly he, too, sees the light, realizes he loves Mr Segal's daughter Hara, and all is set for a happy ending.

The plot is evidently pretty naïve in outline, and the main strength of the play is that it stays naïve and unspoilt all through. Naïvety has its drawbacks, of course – the first act is much too rambling, and the points in which the parallel with *Hamlet* are insisted on, notably a travesty version of the 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy, are sometimes embarrassingly self-conscious, but in the main the whole thing has an unaffected theatrical *élan* which came over even in a not very satisfactory production from Oxford Playhouse (only a Jewish cast could play it naturally; a mainly Gentile cast has to work at it and this, however well they work, weighs the play down and prevents a feeling of real spontaneity). 'What is the purpose of life?' asks David at one point, and Sam replies: 'The purpose of life is to be aware that that question exists'; in those terms, at least, the conclusion is inevitable – the play must end happily with singing and rejoicing, and David can settle down to selling herrings on his father's stall, provided that he stays alive to the world about him and keeps his dreams alive ('Commit arson every day in your imagination, burn down the previous day's lies, have a little revolution now and again in your heart'). The sentimentality is obvious, but at least it is consistent and unashamed.

Kops's work since *The Hamlet of Stepney Green* has been on the whole uneven and disappointing, mainly, it seems, because the original integrity of his primitive vision has suffered from an admixture of more sophisticated materials which he has not been able to absorb completely into a new and more complex view of the world. *Goodbye, World*, his second play (produced at the Guildford Theatre in 1959) is the least successful of them, being hardly dramatic in any normal sense at all. Its hero, John, is again the obsessed dreamer we have already encountered, though much more inarticulate than David: he is a habitual criminal at 22, in prison when his mother commits suicide. His obsession is

twofold: to find out if she left any message for him (apart from the 'Goodbye, World,' scrawled on her dressing-table mirror before she died), and to see that she gets a decent funeral. To this end he escapes from prison and the whole action of the play takes place in a house in the street where his mother died; he has rented a room here from a faded, once-elegant old woman, and awaits his chance to find out more about his mother's death while various eccentric characters – landlady, blind circus clown, drink-sodden Irishman – drift in and out and the police watch and wait in the street outside. Everyone talks interminably, mainly in long autobiographical monologues retailed to a more or less passive listener, and nothing is ever concluded; John never gets out of doors because of the police, and finally, after three acts of conversation, he gives himself up.

Here the convention is much more realistic than in *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*, and the result strongly suggests that, as we had suspected, Kops is not a thinker, even if possibly he would like to see himself as one, but just has a natural flair for the theatre which given the right material and the right form can produce a lively piece of theatrical fantasy. *Change for the Angel* (1960) reinforces this belief: it taxes Kops's powers of construction to the utmost, and on the whole they are found badly wanting, but one or two of the fragments into which the play falls have, taken in isolation, considerable theatrical effectiveness, and they are nearly always those farthest from realism. The play is about a family losing its identity and standards in the modern city: the father is a baker who cannot keep his self-respect in a world of mass-produced packaged bread and has taken to drink, the mother is kindly but weak, and their three children are all in various ways dissatisfied and at odds with the world about them: the elder brother has become the leader of a local gang of toughs, the daughter is seduced by an American serviceman, and the young son (the dreamer again) wants to be a writer, though his father wants him to become an engineer, and consequently father and son are savagely at odds.

This son, Paul, is presumably the central character in the play, and it is his final departure after his mother's death in the last act to live his own life and become a writer (the dream, for once,

winning out) which concludes the play. But essentially he remains static throughout, complaining constantly about the same things, and staying always on the same emotional level. Consequently, he is virtually useless as a unifying factor in the play, and tends for dramatic purposes to slip into the background, along with his tentative relations with the girl upstairs and the rumble of Oedipal complications with his easygoing mother. Instead, it is the father who is the motive force of the play's action, and he is perhaps the most inconsistent and least believable character of them all, since it is hard to believe that the mild, suffering character of the first act could suddenly be galvanized into attempted rape in the second, even allowing for a quality of quiet desperation in all he does. As it happens, though, it is precisely the sections least believable in realistic terms – the passage leading up to the rape, which involves a distant relative recently out of a mental home, and the invocation of the Angel of Death – which come off best in the theatre: once he is away from the tiresome requirements of realistic character development, and able to work in great, simple dramatic symbols or drift off into dream fantasy, Kops comes into his own.

His latest full-length play to be produced, *The Dream of Peter Mann*, which was written with the aid of an Arts Council bursary while Kops was resident dramatist with the British Old Vic, who were originally to produce it, is something of a return to form; at least, it is a return to Kops's home ground. It starts with children's street songs, like *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*, and a formalized evocation of street-trading life (with some side-swipes, à la *Change for the Angel*, at the modern passion for synthetic packaged goods), then Peter, who dreams of founding the greatest Superstore ever and winning the flashy and selfish Sylvia, is persuaded by a disreputable old chess-playing tramp to steal his mother's savings in order to go and prospect for uranium to make his fortune. This he tries to do while a wedding is in progress, and Jason, a sinister local shopkeeper, is trying without much success to court his mother. But the safe falls on top of him and most of the play is taken up with his delirious dream. He steals the bride from the wedding, his childhood sweetheart Penny, and away they go with Alex, the tramp, to look for uranium.

Twelve years later they arrive back battered and penniless to find that a new barbarism has overtaken the world they knew; everyone has become obsessed with the search for uranium and Jason has become a sort of war-lord for the district. Neither Peter's mother nor Sylvia recognizes him, and he is on the point of being executed when his mother pretends to recognize him just to save his neck. Subsequently he finds, however, that his old salesman's gift of the gab has not deserted him, and soon he has won over all the downtrodden inhabitants to work for him; his mother and Sylvia recognize him now he looks like being successful, and when we next see him he is the richest man in the world, with his own deep shelter to protect him when the Bomb falls and his own factories manufacturing the vital commodity of the moment, shrouds. As the moment for the Bomb approaches he locks himself in his shelter and everyone else is killed, but he finds that even he is fated, his mother appears as the Angel of Death and sings him to sleep with an old nursery song which told him he would be king – and so he is, but of the kingdom of death, not life. At this point he wakes up, cured of his earlier fantasies, and realizes that it was Penny he loved all the time; she has refused to go through with her marriage to the other man, so he can marry her, and to round things off Alex is revealed as his mother's husband and his long-lost father.

Clearly Kops's imagination has been set free by the unabashed return to fantasy, and the result is much more satisfactory than either of his previous two plays, but unfortunately the 'philosophy' weighs a little heavy on the piece and the author does not seem to have quite the intellectual flexibility necessary to put over such a bald message about human values without making his drama naïve in the least acceptable sense; inevitably the play carries with it reminders of those rather tiresome expressionist dramas of the twenties in which man's life was compared to that of a rockpool or an adding machine, and there is no denying that Kops's play is considerably less successful in this genre than, say, *R.U.R.*, to which in some sections it bears more than a fleeting resemblance.

At least with his most recent play, *Stray Cats and Empty Bottles*, Kops seems to have left behind for the moment the hawk-



6a. 'The Lion in Love': b. 'The Knack'





7. Joan Littlewood and Frank Norman at a rehearsal at The Theatre Royal, Stratford East

ing of oversimplified social messages which marred *The Dream of Peter Mann*, and to a lesser extent *Change for the Angel*; he has even thrown overboard his dreamer-hero with a mother-fixation. Instead, this is just a ballad-play in one act about a group of derelicts living on a scrapheap in a shack destined for rapid demolition. Jack collects stray cats for skinning and Iris collects empty bottles; the plot of the play, in so far as it has any plot, concerns their attempts to assist Newton, a refined and eccentric tramp, to marry the mad White Lady of Wapping for her money, which turns out in the end to be non-existent after all. The fantasy is worked out in completely theatrical terms, with songs, dances, improvisatory dialogue, and occasional passages of poetic invention; there appears to be no motive other than simply to entertain, which it does. The amateur production by Cambridge A.D.C. was supervised by the author, who is said to be dissatisfied with all previous productions of his work, and achieved a semi-balletic (or perhaps semi-operatic) drive and precision which suggests that a strong directorial hand (and ideally, perhaps, Joan Littlewood's) is necessary if his essentially artless works are to make their maximum effect. What Kops will do next in the theatre it is impossible to guess: one can hardly tell an ex-primitive to go back to being primitive if sophistication does not serve him so well as naivety did, but it may be, or so it seems on the basis of *Stray Cats and Empty Bottles*, that he is still unspoilt when he has the right, not-too-demanding subject to hand.

Henry Livings (born 1929), the second dramatist in this Theatre Workshop annexe, still has touches of the primitive about him, but even his first play to be produced, *Stop It, Whoever You Are*, which was put on at the Arts in 1960, suggests a much more sophisticated talent than Kops's, and one capable of much further development. The main justification for including Livings in this section is that he was for some time an actor at Theatre Workshop and there is evidence in his work that he learned a thing or two from the experience (he says himself that Joan Littlewood has probably been the greatest single influence on his work). In particular his use of one of the lightest and most popular forms, farce, to convey something serious in an unexpected

way, seems to bear, however, faintly, the impress of Stratford training.

Stop It, Whoever You Are has proved one of the most controversial of recent additions to the new drama – as far as the critics are concerned at least; some found it both profound and riotously funny, others determinedly found it neither. It is certainly uneven, and still rather undisciplined, but at least it implies a powerful individuality at work, and as it progresses it gradually gathers a wealth of subsidiary meanings without ever (and herein lies the author's artfulness) departing from the farcical tone in which it began, so that by the time we reach its extraordinary final scene we suddenly discover that the apparently simple artless North Country farce has taken on the force and intensity of a parable. The story concerns one William Perkin Warbeck, lavatory attendant in a big northern factory. Trying to keep order in the washrooms he is beaten up by two young apprentices he accuses of being homosexuals, then he is virtually raped by a local Lolita, caught *in flagrante delicto* by the police and put on a charge. A little revenge he plans to spoil the moment of triumph of his detested landlord, Alderman Oglethorpe, goes astray when he soaks, by accident, his employer and one-time military commander Captain Bootle, whom he regards highly, and then he dies. In the last scene, a seance, he is allowed to get his own back by telling his dreadful wife, from a safe distance beyond the grave, that he enjoyed the attentions of the precocious Marilyn, and in a grand finale the whole place is blown up when a leaky gas-pipe explodes.

The great pleasure to be derived from this cycle of disasters is basically that of seeing the meek at last inherit the earth, but meanwhile Warbeck's many misfortunes are told with a robustness and gusto which command amused attention and at the same time do not work counter to the author's serious intentions, though they may occasionally disguise them from the unwary. What Livings is actually getting at emerged more clearly, therefore, in his television play *The Arson Squad*, produced later, but written earlier, than *Stop It, Whoever You Are*, when the disguise behind which the parable lurks is instead that of sober documentary drama. Chris, the floor manager, is persuaded to cover up

the cause of a fire which has nearly burnt down the factory in which he works because the perpetrator, Norman, is simple-minded and if he gets the sack from this job will be virtually unemployable. It is easy for Norman's fellow workers to cover up for him – they don't stand to lose much anyway, provided they stick together – but for Chris it means that he must lose his reputation and his position of responsibility, since he will inevitably be blamed and unless he speaks he cannot clear himself. Then Norman leaves to go to a better job elsewhere, and Chris can speak, but by now no one is likely to believe him, and even his workmates, for whom in a sense he has sacrificed himself, do not want to be involved and will not lift a finger to help him. But is he so innocent, after all? At the last it emerges that one reason the fire was not more quickly dealt with was that he was wasting the odd few minutes flirting with a stupid typist whom he despises even as he finds her attractive, and having come face to face with his pride (the pride, basically, which shrinks at having to admit a transgression so slight and childish) he is able to become truly humble and live again.

There is no escaping the force and conviction of Livings's writing here, even though its form is considerably less adventurous than in *Stop It, Whoever You Are*; the play was in fact, Livings tells us, written in the face of criticism that his plays were all plotless, to prove to himself that he could write a play with an ordinary plot if he wanted to, and did not write as he usually did simply from incapacity in that direction. Thus in many ways *The Arson Squad* stands aside from the main line of Livings's development, but not so *Jack's Horrible Luck*, the next play to emerge in B.B.C. Television's backwards exploration of his work. *Jack's Horrible Luck*, though produced by the B.B.C. with, as usual, no indication that it was not the author's latest work, actually dates back to 1958, and was Livings's very first significant effort at dramatic writing. After leaving Liverpool University at the end of his second year and doing two years National Service in the R.A.F., Livings had been acting up and down the country, and had settled for a while at Theatre Workshop, where he appeared in, among other plays, *The Quare Fellow*.

The influence of Behan, though the Behan of *The Hostage* rather than *The Quare Fellow*, is to be seen in sections of *Jack's Horrible Luck*, which he sold to the B.B.C. after some eighteen months hawking it around (the encouragement gained from this sale set him off, in fact, on a full-time career as a dramatist). The form here is a picaresque adventure story on the Elizabethan model, retailing the encounters of Jack, a naïve young sailor ashore for the night in Liverpool. As in the later works the tone is largely that of broad farcical comedy, with elements bordering on complete fantasy: the central sequences, in which Jack takes up with a bunch of buskers and meths drinkers, goes home with Fred, an odd and crochety busker who has invited him to share a supper of pig's trotters and peas, and becomes involved in a wild and rowdy celebration at Fred's lodgings, suggest something like Joyce's Nighttown seen in the distorting mirror provided by the 'brockel' in *The Hostage*. Despite these apparent influences, the play remains richly personal, notably in the early scenes with the buskers, when Jack amicably encourages Fred to do his dance in the alley and thereby indirectly causes him to trip up and spoil his entrance.

There is also a framework suggestive of the parable-in-farce technique Livings was later to develop in *Stop It, Whoever You Are*: Jack's quest for a semi-mythical café, Uncle Joe's, which he expects to offer him an evening of complete contentment, though when he finds it, of course, it has turned into a rexine-and-formica coffee-bar and 'Uncle Joe' himself has dwindled to a timid employee with a police whistle always at the ready. The theme of the search for Uncle Joe's is perhaps the least satisfactory part of the play, however (indeed, it is completely lost sight of for most of the time), and though we know that his longing for the external dispenser of happiness represented by Uncle Joe is doomed to disappointment, it seems rather too unsubtle to establish this right at the beginning by making his mate remark, in an attempt to keep his expectations within bounds, 'Uncle Joe's not God, you know, he's just a man. . . .' (As a matter of fact, the whole framework of the quest for Uncle Joe's – all the play has in the way of 'plot', that is – was not in the original script at all, but was added at the suggestion of the B.B.C.; this

may explain why it does not seem always quite to fit in with rest.) Even so, bearing in mind, as its first critics could not do, that *Jack's Horrible Luck* is Livings's very first play, its originality and promise are clear and unmistakable, even though, coming apparently after *Stop It, Whoever You Are*, it would have seemed in some ways to represent a disappointing regression.

Livings's next play to be produced after *Jack's Horrible Luck* was *Big Soft Nellie* (originally titled *Thacred Nit*), but before we come on to that there are three plays which should be mentioned, for the record at least: *The Rise and Fall of a Nignog*, an as yet unproduced television play written just before *Stop It, Whoever You Are*, which concerns a character whose weakness compels him to accept any challenge offered to him and finally involves him, almost fatally, in a fantastic scheme to break a prisoner out of gaol; *The Quick and the Dead Quick*, a highly unconventional historical drama about Villon, whom Livings sees as a strikingly modern figure living in an age which offers many parallels with our own; and *Jim All Alone*, a dramatization of Raleigh Trevelyan's book *A Hermit Disclosed*.

Big Soft Nellie carries Livings's characteristic disregard of normal plotting much farther than *Stop It, Whoever You Are*; indeed, in it there is virtually no plot whatever, only a series of incidents in the back room of an electrical appliances shop. The 'big soft Nellie' is Stanley, a mother's boy who is the butt of the staff (with the exception of the dreamy Benny, who is so stupid he hardly counts) and resents it. During the course of the first act Benny and then Stanley practise judo, a police sergeant is called in by Stanley's mother for no good reason, and the other members of the staff persuade Stanley to tell a story while they laugh at him. He decides to do something to make them take notice, and so carries off the vast cabinet of the boss's television set and then (after a long and farcical investigation of its disappearance at the beginning of the second act) returns to give himself up and proclaim himself the thief, hoping optimistically for five years' imprisonment (for all the world like the hero in *The Rise and Fall of a Nignog*, who ends, after his ludicrous attempt at prison-breaking has failed, contentedly asking how long a sentence he will get, secure in the knowledge that at last

someone has had to take notice). Unfortunately his best efforts are all in vain: he is given a conditional discharge, but his work-mates conspire to say nothing of this misfortune in front of him, treating him instead with the deference due to a real prisoner, 'coming-out party' and all, and so finally, even if he is still not noticeably bright, he can at least stand on his own feet as a self-respecting man.

In this play, plot being reduced to the absolute minimum, we can study Livings's individual techniques in their purest state. Basically, like so many of the new dramatists, he seeks just to show people together, interacting, existing. He carries his interest in this – at the expense of normal dramatic construction – far farther than most, however, and in this play comes perhaps closest to an otherwise very different dramatist, Ann Jellicoe. Like her, he writes in terms of a total stage action rather than simply in words; much of what his characters say is merely a gloss on what is happening, and often an apparently completely random exchange in a sequence of *non sequiturs* makes sense only when we see the actors together and understand the relationship between them at that particular point. A conversation between the Sergeant and Marris, the owner of the ship, in the second act is an excellent example. The Sergeant is felicitating himself on a satisfactory conclusion, the culprit discovered and the charges dropped:

MARRIS: Do you ever get those anxieties coming on unexpectedly? No, I don't suppose you do.

SERGEANT: Don't you be surprised.

MARRIS: So we can expect you to grace the British Legion very shortly?

SERGEANT: Thank you. I think I'd better just talk to the staff to wind this business up. Don't want to leave them with the idea that they've got away with everything.

He turns to the door where Benny and Stanley stand pale and resigned.

Ouf!

MARRIS: Yes, they gave me a bit of a start I'll admit.

SERGEANT: They'd gone clean out of my mind. Why don't they go and do something?

MARRIS: I don't know. Perhaps they can't think of anything suitable.

- SERGEANT: Eerie, aren't they? That's how I imagine condemned men look, on the morning.
- MARRIS: Funny how these anxieties come on unexpectedly, isn't it?

On the page it means almost nothing, but when the actors in front of us speak the lines and at the same time we see them together and understand what they are feeling, the shared tension, the sudden intuitive points of contact which lead Marris first to ask about the anxieties and then, out of the blue, to see when the Sergeant is experiencing one, it all makes perfect sense. So, too, does the small parable behind the whole action of the play: that what the ignored want more than anything else is attention, and even a very little, not particularly deserved, will do to get things right.

Meanwhile Livings has already completed another play, *Nil Carborundum*, a story of goings-on in an R.A.F. kitchen manned by unwilling National Servicemen during a nonsensical peace-time exercise, and his productivity shows no sign of diminishing. He has not yet found his audience, and as long as he continues to write in the most familiar popular forms it is doubtful whether, even when he does, he will number many critics among them. He is essentially the sort of dramatist who should come to critical approval by way of popular success rather than the other way round – a Whitehall Theatre audience would have little difficulty in taking his plays at their face value and enjoying them on those terms; the more severe playgoer, who likes to know at once where he is and be sure that he is not wasting his time on something which may turn out, after all, not to be really 'serious' at all, is in a less happy situation. There is a prospect of Livings's work being produced by the London branch of the Stratford Memorial Theatre Company, which may set the seal on Livings as a serious writer; one only hopes it does not at the same time deprive him of the only audience who can simply laugh at, say, the business of the clock in *Stop It, Whoever You Are* without grimly stopping to ask what it *means*.

The Road from Wigan Pier

Productions out of Town

THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES, notably during the reign of Miss Horniman at Manchester, when the provinces have made a major contribution to the British theatre. At first glance one would expect this not to be so now; the idea that nothing happens in the cultural life of Britain, a festival or two apart, outside London has become deeply ingrained since the last war. And so, in fact, it proves, but when one considers the question this is, after all, still rather surprising. According to Part II of the Arts Council report *Housing the Arts in Great Britain* there were forty-four repertory companies functioning in England at December 31, 1960, not to mention innumerable little theatres and other more or less occasional amateur groups. Here, one might think, if anywhere, there should be at least occasionally room for the new dramatist, and on reflection it is surprising how little contribution they have made rather than how much.

The reason for this state of affairs is to be found mainly in the financial situation of the reps and in the sort of audience they cater for. Most of them, particularly those in the south and west, are in a decidedly shaky position financially, and only just manage to balance their books by the end of the year (supposing they can balance them at all). This obviously inclines them to look as far as possible for works with a proved popular appeal to begin with, in order to keep any losses they may incur to an absolute minimum. Then the type of audiences they rely on for regular support has a lot to do with the choice of play. Many of the reps are situated in towns with a high proportion of retired people (Bath, Bournemouth, Cheltenham, Eastbourne, Folkestone, Harrogate, and so on), or in staid county towns. Even those in industrial areas depend mainly for their regulars on the middle-aged members of the professional classes who pride themselves on being, in a modest way, patrons of the arts, but like to feel they are getting something solid and 'good' for their money.

Consequently, even if they wanted to try something new and revolutionary (and supposing they felt they could master it in

the week or fortnight possible for rehearsal), few repertories would be able to take the risk. Of course, most of them do produce new plays from time to time, but with a few noble exceptions the plays chosen are of the most conservative type imaginable: well-made costume plays, drawing-room comedies, and the like. At best they will be new translations of foreign classics (as at the Bristol Old Vic) or enterprising importations from America (as at the Pembroke, Croydon). The companies which have consistently followed an adventurous policy with the plays they produce could, in fact, be numbered on the fingers of one hand, the leading instances being the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry; Stephen Joseph's peripatetic Studio Theatre (based on Scarborough); the Playhouse, Oxford, and the Nottingham Playhouse.

The Belgrade, from which the 'third wave' of the new drama, consisting primarily of Arnold Wesker, emanated, is in a rather special position, being an entirely new theatre opened in 1958 and subsidized by the Coventry Corporation as well as the Arts Council. Its record for new productions was excellent during its early days, under the direction of Bryan Bailey, who was killed in a car crash in 1960. Subsequently, however, there seems to have been a move, inspired possibly by those who have to foot the bill, to curb experiment in this direction. And it must be admitted that apart from the Wesker Trilogy (which was, in any case, handed on to the Belgrade by the Royal Court) nothing very interesting has emerged, though not apparently for want of trying: other productions more ambitious than successful have been James Forsyth's *Trog*, *Ferdinand the Toreador*, a rather un-inventive musical by Leo Lehman, Thomas Muschamp's satirical comedy about the refugee problem, *Bridge of Sighs*, and an extravagantly odd experimental piece adapted from a radio original, *The Sleeping Bandsmen*, by Jeremy Sandford. Another quite interesting enterprise, and one of the theatre's biggest commercial successes, was *Never Had It So Good*, a play about life in changing Coventry commissioned from the South African author John Wiles, but this had the virtues more of topical journalism than of lasting drama.

Stephen Joseph's company is a theatre-in-the-round which

tours for most of the year, with a summer home at the Library Theatre, Scarborough, and a promised new permanent base at Newcastle-under-Lyme. It has an Arts Council grant, carrying with it a strong recommendation that the company should tour widely to bring live theatre to towns which would otherwise go without, and is able to pursue its enterprising policy mainly because of its relatively low overheads – it is a small company, averaging around six actors at a time, and the in-the-round form of presentation reduces props and scenery to a minimum – and the nature of its Scarborough audience, who on the whole drift in to while away a wet seaside afternoon or evening, with few preconceptions about what they are going to see. Stephen Joseph has held on several occasions summer play-writing courses at Scarborough for aspiring dramatists, and, in fact, ‘discovered’ David Campton, the company’s most interesting acquisition, during one of them. Studio Theatre has produced a new play by Campton every year since 1957, and has also given a showing to a number of other young writers, most notably James Saunders, like Campton holder of an Arts Council bursary for play-writing, and ‘Ronald Allen’, the pen-name of Alan Ayckbourn, a 22-year-old actor with the company, whose *Standing Room Only*, a comedy envisaging the situation when London traffic has become finally immobilized in one vast immovable traffic jam, showed more than promise, if still less than complete achievement.

Oxford Playhouse has encouraged an odd variety of dramatists (under the aegis of an odd variety of companies) in its time, among them Bernard Kops (*The Hamlet of Stepney Green*), John McGrath (*A Man Has Two Fathers*), Robert Bolt (*The Critic and the Heart*), Doris Lessing (*Mr Dollinger*), and Henry Livings (*Big Soft Nellie*). No clear line of taste is discernable, as at Coventry (left-wing working-class drama preferred) or the Studio Theatre (experimental fantasy), but at least the theatre provides a chance for something new to reach the stage, which is a lot to be thankful for. The Nottingham Playhouse has on the whole steered closer to the prevailing taste than the other three theatres mentioned, and consequently the writers it has chiefly encouraged – Beverley Cross, Willis Hall, and Keith Waterhouse – are to be found among the good commercial dramatists

in the under-forties group, reviewed briefly in the epilogue to this book, but again the readiness to produce anything even as relatively conventional as *Strip the Willow* or *Celebration* must be accounted by repertory standards unusually daring.

Otherwise the repertory scene is bleak indeed as far as new drama is concerned, despite the one or two exceptions which can be made to the generalization. Birmingham Rep, for instance, has produced two rather adolescent comedies, *The Waiting Room* and *Who's Who*, by a young actor, Terence Lodge; the Queens Theatre, Hornchurch, has brought us, along with a Sean O'Casey première and one or two interesting new plays by older writers, at least one striking new dramatist, David Perry, and the Guildford Theatre, as well as staging a number of heavily conventional pieces, has had the sense to persevere with Richard Dellar after his first wildly overambitious play of imminent nuclear destruction, *The Edge*, until rewarded by a quietly strong and capable play of school life, *This Other Eden*. Even so, it seems for the moment that the third wave of new drama from the provinces has broken and receded with disappointing rapidity, and it is as true now as it ever was that even writers with a strong regional flavour in their work (like Alun Owen or Shelagh Delaney) have to come to London for production and recognition. But then, after all, the forty-four companies are still there (unless any of them have closed down in the meantime, of course), and one never knows when one of them may find another Wesker to head another provincial invasion of the West End stage.

ARNOLD WESKER

ARNOLD WESKER HAS ACQUIRED a greater reputation on the strength of a still relatively smaller body of work than any other dramatist of his generation, with the possible exception of Shelagh Delaney (who was hailed rather too rashly as a genius on the strength of a single play). Up to now, his works consist of four stage plays – *The Kitchen* and ‘The Wesker Trilogy’ – one unproduced film script, *Pools*, from which excerpts have been published, and one or two short stories and political pamphlets. And yet, he has already been hailed as ‘the most promising and exciting young dramatist to come into the English theatre since the end of the war’, and the eventual performance of all three Wesker Trilogy plays in sequence at the Royal Court in 1960 found the critics almost without exception ready to bring out their most unequivocally enthusiastic adjectives, and hail the work as an unparalleled achievement. When his earlier play *The Kitchen* came to be filmed the National Film Finance Corporation demonstrated confidence in an even more practical form by putting up the whole production costs of the film instead of the proportion normal in their dealings with independent producers.

The most striking thing about Wesker, of course – even before one looks in more detail at his individual plays – is the boldness of his concepts. The very idea of a trilogy attempting to sum up the situation of the working classes today (and glancing back as far as 1936 for the root causes of their present situation) is extraordinary enough in the modern theatre, but that it should have been carried out, that the plays should have been performed not only singly but together in repertory at a West End theatre, and that the whole thing should have been adjudged a success by most of the country’s leading theatre critics is a striking achievement indeed. But when we look beyond the broad picture, and examine in detail the claims to survival of Wesker’s work after the fashionable enthusiasm of the moment has died down, a number of doubts intrude, along with the thought that Wesker’s work is, after all, particularly apt to

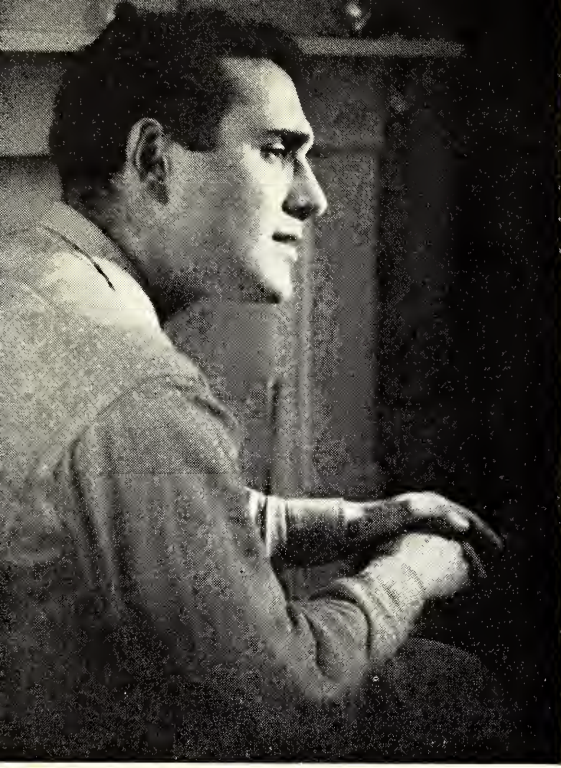
appeal on first acquaintance for quite other than strictly dramatic reasons. To see how this may have come about we might first consider the curve his career in the theatre and his general reputation have followed since first he became known.

Wesker is the perfect example of the new working-class dramatist. He was born in the East End in 1932, the son of a Jewish-Hungarian father and a Russian mother, and seemed in the first place a highly unlikely candidate for literary distinction: his father was a tailor and after leaving school his first jobs were as plumber's mate and kitchen porter. From this latter position he set about acquiring a trade, and became a pastrycook: as a pastrycook he worked for four years in Norwich (where he met his wife), London and Paris, before deciding to take six months off and follow the short course at the London School of Film Technique. While there he wrote his first play, *Chicken Soup With Barley*, and shortly after leaving he sketched out *Pools* and *The Kitchen*. *Pools* was submitted to the Committee of the British Film Institute of Experimental Film Fund who approved in principle but found the estimated £3,000 required to film it beyond their resources. *The Kitchen*, a short two-acter written with half an eye on television, was sent, the author relates, to every television company without success (later, when Wesker was a name, they all wanted it and he had the elementary satisfaction of refusing all offers). But fortunately at about this time the Arts Council decided to encourage the repertory movement up and down the country by offering, in addition to the individual grants already being made, a special grant to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Gaiety, Manchester, by Miss A. E. F. Horniman. The grants were made available to any repertory company producing a new play, and in association with the Arts Council, the Royal Court lent its stage for a month to provincial repertory companies with suitable new plays to offer. As the general standard of plays offered was so low, the Royal Court, wanting at least one play worth seeing in the season, sent *Chicken Soup With Barley*, which was then under consideration for a Sunday-night production-without-décor, to the recently opened Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, guaranteeing them a week's showing in London if they would produce it and lending them a Royal Court



8a. 'The Quare Fellow': b. 'The Hostage'





9a. Harold Pinter : *b.* John Mortimer



c. Shelagh Delaney : *d.* Brendan Behan



director, John Dexter, for the purpose. It had its first performance in Coventry on 7 July 1958, and opened for the week at the Royal Court on 14 July.

It is curious, in the light of subsequent events, to look back on the first reviews it received. By the time the play was revived two years later at the Royal Court as the first panel of Wesker's working-class triptych, one critic was ready to find it his best play, and the word 'masterpiece' was freely bandied about. But on this first showing, the rapture was decidedly modified. The play was generally found sympathetic but unremarkable; its picture of East End Jewish life was distinguished by a sober realism, it was evidently sincere, and though the expression might be a bit fumbling, the author clearly deserves encouragement. And despite the widespread second thoughts on the matter, this summary still seems entirely fair.

Chicken Soup With Barley covers twenty years in the lives of an East End Jewish family, the Kahns, from October 1936 to December 1956. It works on two levels, which arguably do not quite correspond, and may even be mutually exclusive in what the author is trying to convey on each. Personally, the play seems to be about recurrent patterns of behaviour from generation to generation: socially, it is about the working classes' loss of sense of purpose with the arrival of a socialist government and the Welfare State, the disappearance of all the big, clear-cut issues of the inter-war years. The conflict is obvious: on the personal level its progression is circular, on the social level it appears to move in a straight line, and the necessity of reconciling these two contradictory movements in the argument is no doubt the main reason why one comes out of the theatre feeling that the play's final effect is oddly muddled and out of focus.

The personal argument is simple. When we first meet the Kahns, Sarah is already the dominant figure in the household; she is politically active, for ever helping to organize demonstrations and arranging the lives of those around her according to Marxist-Leninist principles. Harry, her husband, is weak-willed and totally unconcerned in politics; all he wants is a quiet life without worries, but he is constantly having banners thrust into

his hand by Sarah and being ordered to demonstrate. He generally runs away and hides till it's all over. Or just sleeps. By the second act, in 1946, he sleeps most of the time, being always out of work, even when the whole country is booming; by the third act he is actually paralysed after his second stroke and virtually senile. Throughout the three acts, Sarah remains firm in her convictions and her determination to do something, but gradually the children begin to follow, so it seems, in their father's footsteps. First Ada, the young firebrand, becomes disillusioned with politics and goes off to start a new life in the country with her equally disillusioned husband, Dave, and then Ronnie, himself eager enough in the second act, becomes by 1956 equally disillusioned: 'I've lost my faith and I've lost my ambition. . . . I don't see things in black and white any more. My thoughts keep going pop, like bubbles. That's my life now – you know? – a lot of little bubbles going pop.' He understands Harry now, and at the end of the play he seems all set to become another Harry, with no sense of purpose to keep him going. He doesn't care any more, and the last words of the play are left with Sarah, on the verge of despair: 'Ronnie, if you don't care you'll die.'

So much for the pattern of personal relationships in the play. But the main point about these characters is the importance in their lives of social relationships, social responsibilities. They are taught to live for others, and the tragedy in their lives comes when they learn through bitter experience that their services are not required and in any case others may well be not worth their trouble. Life is not as simple and clear-cut in its issues as everyone believed when there were barricades in the streets, strikes to be organized for better conditions, and 'all the world was a communist'. First Ada and Dave undergo a personal disillusionment, expressed by Ada:

I'm tired, mother. I spent eighteen months waiting for Dave to return from Spain and now I've waited six years for him to come home from a war against Fascism and I'm tired. Six years in and out of offices, auditing books and working with young girls who are morons – lip-sticked, giggling morons, and Dave's experience is the same – fighting with men who he says did not know what the war was about. Away from their wives they behave like animals. In fact, they wanted to get

away from their wives to behave like animals. Give them another war and they'd run back again. Oh yes! the service killed any illusions Dave may have once had about the splendid and heroic working class.

But then, and even worse, comes the philosophical disillusion. Dave and Ada continue to believe in their ideals, but come to the conclusion that the world is not worth their trouble, and withdraw instead to an ivory tower of arts and crafts in the Cotswolds. But for Ronnie is reserved the harsher awakening, for not only does he come, while working in a kitchen, to the same sort of conclusions about people in general as Ada, but Hungary destroys his faith in the ideals which have previously ruled his life: 'You didn't tell me there were any doubts,' he cried angrily to his mother when she refuses to understand what he is talking about. For Sarah it is simple: her faith is unchanging.

All my life I worked with a Party that meant glory and freedom and brotherhood. You want me to give it up now? You want me to move to Hendon and forget who I am? If the electrician who comes to mend my fuse blows it instead, so I should stop having electricity? I should cut off my light? Socialism is my light, can you understand that? A way of life. A man *can* be beautiful. I hate ugly people – I can't bear meanness and fighting and jealousy – I've got to have light. I am a simple person, Ronnie, and I've got to have light and love.

But none of it means anything any more, Ronnie answers.

So what if it all means nothing? When you know that you can start again.

It is all so simple for Sarah, because her faith grew in heroic times and she is indomitable. But what about young Socialists? Can they recapture this single-minded belief if they have nothing to fight for any more? If on the personal level the play ends with a Q.E.D. (like father, like son), on the level of social argument we find only a question mark. How are Ada and Dave making out in the country, and if it is possible to start again, how will Ronnie manage to do so? These are the questions which the second and third plays of the trilogy take up, and so skipping for the moment *The Kitchen* (a parenthesis which might be taken to represent Ronnie's experiences away from home), we must go on to see what answers, if any, they offer.

The answer offered by *Roots* (1959) is a purely personal one. Where *Chicken Soup With Barley* covers a large tract of time and handles a number of changing, developing characters, *Roots* occupies only a fortnight and concentrates almost entirely upon one character, Beatie Bryant. Beatie is a girl Ronnie has met and becomes engaged to in London, but her home is deep in Norfolk and her people are farm-workers. She comes home without him, but he is to follow later, and meanwhile she has time to explain about him and his ideas to her people, and incidentally to realize to the full how far her people fall short of them. But she herself is still in transition. Though she obediently paints abstracts and has learnt to say all the right things about them, though she has picked up all Ronnie's ideas about classical music, popular culture and human relationships, all she can do is to parrot them; she does not really understand, though she is pathetically willing to learn. Indeed, so far as one can make out, Ronnie has been attracted to her most of all by her potentialities: 'It's going up in flames,' he is quoted as saying, 'but I am going to make bloody sure I save someone from the fire.'

So Beatie arrives home full of half-assimilated ideas and prosletizing zeal, to meet a blank wall of indifference. Her mother has some superficial characteristics in common with the conventional dramatic countrywoman, seen as an Earth-mother figure, unchanging but full of simple wisdom. But this time the illusion is shattered by a cold gust of reality, for she is irremediably stupid: her proverbial philosophy is an easy substitute for thought, her apparent warmth and good nature a shallow cover for the terrifying savagery which lies just below the surface ready to break out whenever she comes into contact with new ideas or feels that anyone may be looking down on her. In the last act it emerges to devastating effect when the news arrives that Ronnie is not coming and has decided that marriage between him and Beatie would not work. Mrs Bryant does not care that Beatie is suffering; all that concerns her is that she has been proved right and her daughter wrong, that after all 'The apple don't fall far from the tree' and Beatie, though she may give herself airs and think she is better than the rest of them, cannot really escape.

But there she is wrong, for partly in reaction to the news of Ronnie's defection, Beatie does begin to think for herself, to speak for herself: she sees the falsity of Ronnie's ideas about country workers, living in mystic communion with nature, but sees, too, that their present abject condition is their own fault: 'The whole stinkin' commercial world insults us and we don't care a damn. Well, Ronnie's right – it's our own bloody fault. We want the third-rate – we got it!' Transported with her own sudden flow of eloquence she cries out as the curtain falls: 'God in heaven, Ronnie! It does work, it's happening to me, I can feel it's happened. I'm beginning, on my own two feet, I'm beginning. . . .' The final stage direction assures us that whatever she will do her family will continue to live as before, but she 'stands alone – articulate at last'.

In other words, *Roots* is a sort of illustration of the ideas expressed by Ada in *Chicken Soup With Barley*: though hardly in the same William Morrisy way (Beatie would be scornful of Ada's ideas about life in the country), Beatie, too, has won through to some sort of personal salvation in her own devious fashion, without recourse to the doubtful panacea of immersion in great causes and the submission of individual interests to hazy ideas of the general good. As an illustration it adds something to the first part of the trilogy: it tells us, for one thing, that even if Ronnie has inherited his father's chronic inertia and indecision he may not be utterly useless – he can help others, or an other, to self-realization, and others can carry on the struggle even if he falls by the wayside.

In a more practical, external fashion also it added something to the first of the trilogy: critical acclaim. When it opened in Coventry the notices were decidedly mixed, the only point of general agreement being the brilliance of Joan Plowright's performance in the central role. But by the time the play reached London word had somehow got round that it offered a great theatrical experience and so this time the notices were almost unanimously favourable. It is, admittedly, always difficult to disentangle the merits of a performance from those of the play performed, but in retrospect one cannot help wondering how far the critics were swayed in their judgement by the superb performance

of Joan Plowright as Beatie; later productions with other actresses have tended noticeably to cut the play down to size, and in particular the scene at the end of the second act where Beatie, trying to explain to her mother what she likes about classical music, is carried away in dance of joyous abandon has proved terribly embarrassing when played by anyone but her.

Certainly *Roots* seems on cool consideration decidedly inferior to *Chicken Soup With Barley* on two major counts: construction and authenticity. Skilled construction is not a notable quality of the first play – it rambles over a number of years in the family's life, and characters are picked up and set down rather arbitrarily – but at least if it is a ragbag it is a full ragbag: every scene and speech is there with a purpose. But *Roots* has every indication of being a one-act play (an excellent one-act play in all probability) blown up to three acts by the exigencies of the modern theatre. The first act is almost duplicated in the second as far as ideas are concerned, since the main point the dramatist is trying to make is the almost inconceivable limitation of the Bryants' minds: again and again the same clichés recur, the same substitutes for thought, the same pointless stories endlessly, inanely repeated. But whether he needs two whole acts – indeed nearly two and a half, up to the arrival of Ronnie's letter – to make this single point is another matter. For the Bryants are bores. It is necessary to the point Wesker is making that they should be bores, but he does not manage to resolve that perennial dramatic problem, how can one represent bores dramatically without at the same time boring one's audience? The real action of the play does not begin until the third act, and in the meantime the audience would be rather less inclined to boredom if the situation of Beatie in relation to her family and that of her family in relation to her had been sketched in much more economically than the three-act form allows.

As to authenticity, this raises a crucial question about all Wesker's plays. His naturalism, his unvarnished truth has generally been taken as his chief merit, one which excused faults of construction and some carelessness in detail, which even excused occasional patches of boredom, since that was like life and was a risk he had to run if he was to picture the lives of the

inarticulate with complete accuracy. Walter Allen summed up the views of many critics when he wrote of *Roots*: 'This is by far the best and most faithful play about British working-class life that has appeared.' But is what Wesker writes 'true' in this very basic sense at all? British working-class life, after all, is a subject about which most critics owe their knowledge to the plays they see much more than to life itself, and the main reasons, it would seem, that Wesker's plays have impressed them as particularly authentic are that (a) they differ markedly from the conventional picture and (b) their differences are nearly all in the direction of greater squalor and brutality, especially in *Roots*, which is almost a Zola-esque tract on the degradation of country life.

The argument is then simple: if this account differs from what we are used to and is less what we normally want to hear (no heroic workers for Mr Wesker), then presumably the reason for this deviation from what is standard and acceptable can surely be nothing but a greater concern for truth on the part of the author. Added to this, of course, Wesker's own background – the fact that he comes from an East End Jewish family, he has worked in kitchens, his wife comes from Norfolk and he may be presumed to have first-hand knowledge of East Anglian life – all tells in his favour, since obviously, critics reason, he must know what he is talking about. But if we look more closely at the plays from this point of view, doubts immediately arise. For one thing, one would not deny that in principle the Kahns and their story are possible, but typical, *pace* the critics, they are certainly not. Sarah and Harry, it is made quite clear, are first-generation immigrants, and if one thing has been notable about new arrivals in the Jewish East End for the last hundred years or so, it is their political inactivity. Frequently they have come from states where political activity as understood in Britain has been impossible, and has meant nothing; even when this is not necessarily the case they have usually been fleeing from persecution, and all they have wanted to do is to get on quietly with their lives, make a living and not be noticed. Though, of course, many East End Communists are Jewish, they turn out almost invariably to be second- and third-generation Jews who have been sufficiently established in this country to have had a quite 'suburban' back-

ground of grammar-school education, but have chosen to stay in the East End and become involved in local politics, frequently to the consternation of their families, who are only too inclined to judge them as failures because they have done this instead of using their education to better themselves and move away.

This is not perhaps an important reflection on the play – there is no rule which says dramatic characters have to be typical – though it may show the views of some of its critics in a rather different light. With *Roots*, however, the question becomes more important, because if we are to be bored we want to be sure that we are being bored to good purpose. ‘Mr Wesker’s ear . . . is extraordinarily acute, enabling him to record the speech of his people with immense conviction,’ writes Bernard Levin in his introduction to the printed text of *Roots*, but is the notation of Norfolk speech so accurate? It is not, certainly, the standard mummerset that we listen to in the theatre, but neither does it bear more than a very superficial resemblance to the language really spoken by Norfolk natives, and the objections of local audiences to the play on these grounds have been too readily brushed aside. So, too, perhaps, have their objections to the picture of rural life in general which the play presents – ah well, the argument runs, of course they wouldn’t like it: it’s much too true for comfort. But even in the most backward agricultural areas the Bryants would be exceptional; not, again, impossible, but exceptional in the unremitting grimness of their lives and their apparent isolation from any sort of social life whatever, if only that of the local hop, the Mothers’ Union and the village store. They are, like the Kahns, a special case, devised to make a particular dramatic point, and it is as such that they must be judged: if the play bores us from time to time, if what happens in it seems every now and then a little unlikely, it is the author who must bear the blame, not just the life he is reflecting.

All this has particular relevance to the third of the trilogy, *I’m Talking About Jerusalem* (1960), because here the case of its characters is more patently extraordinary than in either of the previous plays. In this play we take up again the story of Ada and Dave, who set off for the Cotswolds in Act II of *Chicken Soup With Barley* to live a life of Morrisian devotion to arts and

crafts, to individual toil in which a man can be his own master away from the domination of the industrialist and the machine. The idea of a pair of Jewish intellectuals doing this in 1946 is clearly unusual, even improbable, enough to suggest that this time the author's intention cannot possibly be a simple reflection of life as it is normally lived – the very title implies a parable. And so, surely, the play must be judged. By general consent the least satisfactory of the trilogy – there is too much explaining and tying up of loose ends from the other plays to be done before it can begin to stand satisfactorily on its own – *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* begins with the arrival of Ada and Dave at their cottage in Norfolk (not, oddly enough, the Cotswolds, as Ronnie tells us in *Chicken Soup*), where they are helped to unpack by Sarah and Ronnie. This first act is an extreme example of Wesker's casualness about construction: it adds nothing to the play that could not be conveyed by adding a couple of lines somewhere in the second act, just to tell us that Dave is working as a hired man for the time being, until he can set up on his own as a craftsman-joiner with his own workshop.

The play proper begins in the second act, with Dave's dismissal by his employer (a rather improbable squire-figure of the old school) for a bit of petty pilfering, and even more, for lying about it. It is the warning note: Ada taxes Dave with having brought 'the habits of the factory' with him, and the Colonel asks in genuine puzzlement why they came to the country at all. But for the moment they are permitted to continue in the Morris dream of a life in which the workman is a craftsman and his own master, the family the prime and all-important unit of life. And again a recurrent pattern begins to assert itself: if Ronnie is perhaps a repetition of his father, Ada in the long run turns out to be nearly a repetition of her mother. (She says at one point, after returning from London with the news that Harry has gone mad, 'You say I'm like her [Sarah]? You're right. I shall survive every battle that faces me, too, and because this place means survival to me we-are-staying-put!') But even her determination is not enough to save the situation: the manufacture of furniture on the scale Dave envisages is not an economic proposition, an attempt to turn the place into a guest-house attracts only aunts,

and as the Labour government is voted out of office they pack up and return to London. Their experiment has failed and Dave's moment of vision, in which he decided he was a prophet, has faded with it; now he is defeated, he accepts defeat and sadly but not despairingly recognizes that he is not important.

Now, the only things that seem to matter to me are the day-to-day problems of my wife, my kids and my work. Face it – as an essential member of society I don't really count. I'm not saying I'm useless, but machinery and modern techniques have come about to make me the odd man out. Here I've been, comrade citizen, presenting my offerings and the world's rejected them. I don't count, Ronnie, and if I'm not sad about it you mustn't be either. Maybe Sarah's right, maybe you can't build on your own.

Have they gained anything from their experience, apart from some years of happiness? 'Maybe by coming here you've purified yourselves, like Jesus in the Wilderness,' suggests Ronnie, but no answer, confirming or denying, is given by anyone present. But perhaps an answer of sorts is implied by the strange scene at the end of Act II, in which, as with Beatie's dance at the equivalent point in *Roots*, the play attempts to change register, building the scene in primarily intellectual terms (Beatie has been explaining music to her mother, Ada trying to analyse her relations with her parents), and then attempting a purely emotional resolution. Here the abrupt transition does not work in the theatre, or has not worked up to now, but the acting out of the creation of man by parents and child which concludes the scene does carry precisely the overtones of a ritual purification, attained by obliteration of the self in a very literal 'return to nature', which would fit in with Ronnie's suggestion. The great millennium has not come, and certainly Ada and Dave have not even done much to bring it nearer, but maybe they were working in the right direction. However, the play leaves us on a question mark by recalling to us the age-old resignation of the Jew, as expressed by Harry, who used to say 'It'll purify itself', but was sure that the millennium would not happen in their lifetime.

I'm Talking About Jerusalem also leaves us on a question mark in another way: in the consideration of where Arnold Wesker as a playwright will go next. Though three other plays are

announced as imminent, *Chips With Everything*, a musical (untitled), and *Stand Up, Stand Up*, which may or may not be the play on the life of Jesus which Wesker has said he intends to write, for the moment the only activity of his which has seen the light is the screen adaptation (in collaboration) of his earlier play *The Kitchen* (1958).

This a slight piece about a day in the life of those who work in the kitchens of a large restaurant. The day is crowded, what with illicit love among the ladles, a knife fight, a scalding, a miscarriage, and a climactic smash-up, but it all has a purpose: it is to show what happens when people are cooped up, constantly frustrated and limited entirely to the dreariest, least stimulating practicalities. At the end Marengo, the restaurant proprietor, says: 'I don't know what more to give a man. He works, he eats, I give him money. This is life, isn't it? I haven't made a mistake, have I? I live in the right world, don't I? . . . What more is there more? What *is* there more?' Well, the author assures us, in one of his slightly embarrassing explanatory stage directions: 'We have seen that there must be more', but the viewer may perhaps be forgiven for wondering precisely what more, judging the question in realistic terms, poor Marengo could be expected to provide; if there is no more in the lives of his employees than that, how can he be expected to put it there? In fact, the tone of the whole play seems designed to support the general disenchantment with modern life *per se* expressed directly by Ada and Dave in *Chicken Soup*, for what is the answer to the rebellion of the kitchen-workers except some woolly Morrisian return of the individual to nature? Certainly this seems to be the corollary of the implied accusation that authority (represented in the play by Marengo) has in some mysterious way robbed the workers of whatever it was, in the days when an individual could take pride in his craft, that made life worth living.

One must, of course, bear in mind that *The Kitchen* is an early play, and that it therefore probably represents an attitude, a nostalgia at least, of which Wesker had seen the impossibility by the time he came to write *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*. But the main fault of the play as it stands is not its 'philosophy' (the desire for escape is a reasonable enough theme for drama, and no

rule lays down that the dreams put forward as an alternative to reality must be practicable), but in the purely technical matter of the correlation of the play's two levels, realistic and allegorical. The point is made clearly on a number of occasions that the kitchen is meant to stand in our minds for the whole dirty business of modern life: most explicitly in Dimitri's speech in the first act:

This stinking kitchen is like the world – you know what I mean? It's too fast to know what happens. People come and go, big excitement, big noise. What for? In the end who do you know? You make a friend, you are going to be all your life his friend, but when you go from here – pshtt! you forget! Why you grumble about this one kitchen?

Now, to establish the validity of a parallel like this, it is necessary that the realistic level should be self-evidently true and believable; there should be no evidence that the truth is being doctored to fit the argument. But if one looks at the set-up in *The Kitchen* there is far too much evidence, even to the casual uninformed eye, that this is just what is happening here. Admittedly the critics tended to be so impressed by their knowledge that Wesker had actually worked for a while in a kitchen that they supposed he must necessarily know best, but when one considers it, what restaurant-kitchen could possibly be like this? The lapses from realism are glaring enough on the stage, where one makes allowances for the modifications imposed by convention, but in the film, made completely under Wesker's supervision, these lapses are not only not corrected, but are if anything accentuated. For example, what sort of London restaurant serves 1,500 lunches in two hours every day, with waitress service and presumably a seating capacity of around 500? If such a restaurant did exist, however, and was not run as a self-service cafeteria, it is obviously inconceivable that it could have the menu shown here, involving roast pheasant and (in the film) fresh lobster, as well as steaks, chops and all the paraphernalia of the moderately high-class restaurant (i.e. the sort of restaurant where customers would be likely to complain to the chef that the soup was sour). And as for the suggestion that all the food would be cooked virtually to order during the lunch-hour rush, with cooks franti-

cally trying to keep up with the demand of the waitresses, this is clearly impossible; most of the food would surely have to be cooked some time before and kept warm, according to standard practice in popular restaurants.

Of course, if a kitchen were run as shown here life in it would be hell, but that seems a rather shaky basis for assuming it as an objective reality and then trying to draw conclusions about the world at large from the fact of its existence. The play, admittedly, makes some superficial effect from its neat construction (it is the tightest and best-made of all Wesker's plays) and from the ready appeal of melodrama, especially if a sophisticated audience can be convinced by the exoticism of the setting that this is not just melodrama but life as it is really lived among the other half. But melodrama it obviously is, and melodrama at times so crude that it leans over uncomfortably far into the realm of farce.

In any case *The Kitchen* stands rather aside from the main body of Wesker's work, and his return to it (and incidentally its first full-dress production) after the completion of the trilogy is merely one of those meaningless circumstances of the commercial arts, and brings us no nearer an answer to the question: What next? For *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* is a maddening amalgam of Wesker's best and his worst qualities. The ideas are there all right, but the expression of them tends to be muddled in itself and further obscured by basic technical faults of construction (which are more marked here than in any of the other plays). On the other hand, it does confirm the moving away from the strictly naturalistic which *Roots* to a certain extent foreshadowed: the characters are more obviously and deliberately exceptional than before and what seem to be the play's key scenes, the creation myth, Dave's decking of Ada with flowers and tablecloth when they make up their quarrel, and the argument in which Dave suddenly experiences his moment of vision, are far from the normal conventions of naturalistic or even realistic drama. Significantly, it is the first two of these scenes which Wesker singles out in a recent interview in *The Twentieth Century* as perhaps signifying the way he will go; he is tired of realism, and is cutting down sets and props and even dialogue in his new play,

Chips With Everything, to conform with his new realization that 'the theatre is a place where one wants to *see* things happening'. Consequently in the new play, which concerns the experiences of a young man from a wealthy and cultured background who chooses to stay in the ranks during a period of Army square-bashing, there are 'large chunks' which are 'very unnaturalistic' and one whole scene in which nothing is said at all.

Elsewhere (in an article in *The Transatlantic Review*) Wesker has expressed his reaction from realism at length:

I have discovered that realistic art is a contradiction in terms. Art is the re-creation of experience not the copying of it. Some writers use naturalistic means to re-create experience, others non-naturalistic. I happen to use naturalistic means; but all the statements I make are made theatrically. Reality is as misleading as truth; realistic art makes nonsense. If I develop, it might be away from naturalism. I have discovered that this too can be constricting – but I will still be trying to re-create the reality of my experience. I would no more be non-naturalistic for its own sake than I was naturalistic for its own sake; I am concerned with both only in order to communicate what experience has meant to me.

Though the expression is in detail rather confused (is any distinction intended between 'realistic' and 'naturalistic', and if so what?) the general drift of the statement is clear enough; 'art is not innocent', style is important even if for Wesker what he is saying remains the most important thing, and the closest possible reproduction of actuality is not, after all, the best way of getting over one's meaning. It is early to judge, of course, but if he continues in the direction *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* and his later pronouncements seem to be pointing, and if he can at the same time discipline his uneven talents (which is a big if), Arnold Wesker, hitherto by choice and on principle the most prosaic of our young dramatists, may turn out after all to be the poet the committed theatre in this country has so long awaited. It cannot, in any case, be entirely without significance that he concluded the remarks quoted in *The Twentieth Century* interview with the slightly gnomic statement: 'I really would like to write a play which begins "Once upon a time . . ."'

DAVID CAMPTON

DAVID CAMPTON IS ONE of the most interesting and (as far as London is concerned, anyway) one of the least known of the new dramatists. Apart from odd peripheral appearances in theatres like the British Drama League Theatre-in-the-Round in Fitzroy Square and The Questors, Ealing, his work has been seen in London only in the shape of two revue sketches, 'Service', in *One Over the Eight*, and 'Table Talk' in *On the Brighter Side*, neither of which gives more than the slightest hint of his highly individual qualities and a short one-acter, *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, which played for a fortnight in an ill-assorted triple bill. For Campton, though not a 'provincial' dramatist in any of the usual senses, has been produced almost entirely in the North, where he has had a close and fruitful connexion with Stephen Joseph's Scarborough-based Theatre-in-the Round since 1955. This fact has placed Campton up to now in a disadvantageous position, since his work has either been totally unknown to the London critics or where known has been too hastily written off as imitation-Pinter, a supposition which, while not completely tenable even on the evidence of his plays themselves, proves to be quite impossible when one checks the dates and discovers that *The Lunatic View*, in which his work most closely approaches Pinter's, was staged in 1957, a year before even the first unsuccessful run of *The Birthday Party*.

But this is to anticipate. Campton was born in Leicester, where he still lives, in 1924, and, three and a half years' war service apart, worked from 1941 to 1949 for Leicester Education Authority, and then from 1949 to 1956 for the East Midlands Gas Board. Having begun writing 'shortly after I was first presented with a stick of chalk and a slate', and after twenty-odd plays 'written while I was first learning how to write', he had a play accepted for publication, *Going Home*, in 1949, and then two others, also one-acters. During his time with the Gas Board he became in a modest way quite a successful writer of one-act plays, one of them, *Sunshine on the Righteous*, winning the

Leicestershire finals of the British Drama League Festival in 1954, and another, *The Laboratory*, coming second in the Drama League National One Act Play competition of the same year and winning first prize in the international competition organized by the Tavistock Repertory Company, as well as being televised in 1955. His first full-length play, *The Cactus Garden*, was produced by the Everyman Repertory Company, Reading, in 1955, and in the same year his comedy *Dragons are Dangerous* was produced by Stephen Joseph in Scarborough: the first association between Campton and the Theatre-in-the-Round company. Another play for the company, *Idol in the Sky*, followed in 1956.

All these plays Campton dismisses now as 'rather conventional': the real break in his life came in 1956, when he left the Gas Board and became a professional writer under contract to Associated-Rediffusion, for which he wrote children's programmes, episodes of *The Groves* and *Starr and Company* and comedy scripts for Richard Murdoch. He also wrote for Theatre-in-the-Round *The Lunatic View*, his first decisively original work, and from then on has written something for them each year, joining the company as an actor in 1958.

The remarkable originality of *The Lunatic View* on its appearance in 1957 can perhaps best be gauged by a brief summary of its plot. It takes the form of four playlets, or 'glimpses', as they are called, linked by spoof television announcements. The first, *A Smell of Burning*, tells in a completely deadpan fashion of the incursion of a local government official called Robinson, who appears to be deep in some anarchic plot (gasworks blown up, gunfire in the streets, bodies hung out of the window), into the uncomprehending but quite unruffled menage of Mr and Mrs Jones (she it is who is finally left hanging). In the second, *Memento Mori*, an old man showing a young man round an empty house gradually allows us to understand that he has murdered his wife and buried her beneath the floorboards; finally he immures the young man, too, to avoid the risk of anyone buying the house again. In the third, *Getting and Spending*, the whole life together of a married couple is telescoped into one brief scene, rather like a piece of stop-motion photography, in which the house is never completed, the husband's applications



10a. 'The Kitchen': b. 'Big Soft Nellie'





11. 'Roots'

for key jobs never sent, the baby they are waiting for never arrives, and the one piece of knitting the wife is working on grows little by little to gargantuan proportions. The fourth, *Then . . .*, concerns the only two survivors of the ultimate nuclear explosion, a schoolmaster and a Miss Europe, who have survived because they, and apparently they alone, acted on the official instruction that in case of emergency they should put brown paper bags on their heads. They get to know each other, but the main difficulty is, when will it be safe to take the bags off? They may have to spend their lives without ever seeing each other, but in the end they decide to make together a gesture in favour of life, whatever it may cost, and as the curtain falls they take off the bags.

The oddity of all this, in an England not yet properly habituated to Ionesco, an England in which Pinter and N. F. Simpson would still have to wait two or three years before finding any sort of public, does not need insisting on. Campton calls *The Lunatic View* 'a comedy of menace', which implies perhaps a greater unity than, in fact, the programme has, but four little comedies of menace they certainly are, and only the second, which has a close similarity to a short story by Walter de la Mare, presents menace in any of its traditional forms. Here the *Old Dark House* set-up and the suggestion of bodies in cupboards and beneath the floorboards will come as something fairly familiar to audiences used to being scared into laughter by *The Cat and the Canary*, *Ghost Breakers*, and other such films. But elsewhere the comedy is all too uncomfortably drawn from the normal situations of modern life or a not-inconceivable near future. The couple in *Getting and Spending*, living out in a few minutes' continuous action the whole of a childless, aimless life together, carry their own comment on the modern world without its ever being made inartistically explicit. The casual anarchy of *A Smell of Burning* has some of the riotous inconsequence of an early *Goon Show*, except that the background of the action has enough reality about it to convince us that these things are actually happening amid the general unconcern of the onlookers. And in *Then . . .*, the most controlled and successful of the four, the image of the paper bags as both protection and impediment to

communication is one of those rare dramatic symbols which work perfectly on a realistic level and also gather more and more related meanings the more one thinks about them without ever fuzzing the original effect.

The use of the term 'comedy of menace' makes comparison with Pinter almost inevitable, but on the whole, even apart from the chronological impossibility of Campton being a Pinter imitator, such a comparison serves only to underline the differences between them. There are similarities in formal organization – Campton, like Pinter, favours a free, rhapsodic treatment of the one-act form, working towards some climatic action – and in the handling of dialogue, which tends in their work to progress along lines laid down by unconscious association (reinforced by liberal doses of mutual incomprehension on the part of the characters) rather than by logic. But Campton distinguishes himself from Pinter and the growing number of other British dramatists these days devoting themselves to the Absurd by the fact that his plays do not only betoken a vague unease with things as they are, but show a social conscience worn unequivocally on their author's sleeve.

Campton defines his intentions in adapting the methods of 'the theatre of the Absurd' to the purposes of social comment very clearly:

To my mind the Theatre of the Absurd is a weapon against complacency (which spreads like a malignant fungus). The weapon of complacency is the pigeon-hole. Pigeon-hole an idea, and it becomes harmless. (We have a clean bomb.) It is difficult to be complacent when the roots of one's existence are shaken, which is what the Absurd at its best does. Of course, now, having been given a name, the Theatre of the Absurd is in danger of being popped into a pigeon-hole itself. . . .

Thus while in Pinter's comedies of menace the menace is the more pervasive and potent precisely because it is undefined – if it is anything capable of elucidation it is the constant threat of the outside world to the integrity of the individual personality – for Campton the menace is clear enough: it is the Bomb. Not for nothing were three of the playlets from his later sequence *A View from the Brink* performed before an audience of marchers at a stop on the way to Aldermaston in 1960. This overt social

concern for the troubles of the modern world, with the mushroom cloud hanging over all, is exceptional enough in modern British drama, but what gives Campton his peculiar distinction is that the concern is something genuinely central to his work as a dramatist, and not merely something which, since he feels it sincerely as a political man, he has conscientiously set about incorporating in his art. None of his plays indulges in direct preaching (the nearest to it comes in the linking commentary to *The Lunatic View*), and consequently their effect, being made in properly dramatic terms, is all the more telling.

Campton's 1958 play, *Ring of Roses*, he describes as 'a throw-back . . . a very conventional light comedy, far too thin and horribly facetious', but in 1959 he turned his hand to something much more congenial, an adaptation of *Frankenstein* for in-the-round presentation under the title *The Gift of Fire*, which gave him the chance to explore the possibilities of melodrama, 'a basic dramatic form with popular appeal (not in the long run sense, but appealing to an unsophisticated audience not accustomed to regular theatregoing)', while the relevance of the subject-matter to that of *The Lunatic View* hardly needs stressing.

In his next work, *A View from the Brink*, Campton returned to something like the form of *The Lunatic View*, presenting again four playlets under the general title 'a comedy of menace'; the weakest of them, *Out of the Flying Pan*, a brief and bitter picture of international conferences written largely in a series of cunning gibberish variations on the routine formulas of diplomacy, was later dropped (though it has been anthologized in *New Directions*, a volume of *avant-garde* one-act plays for schools) and replaced by a longer piece, *Little Brother, Little Sister*, to make up Campton's most mature work to date, *Four Minute Warning*. In this Campton's social preoccupations are perfectly exemplified: we have two pieces explicitly connected with nuclear war, *Little Brother, Little Sister* and *Mutatis Mutandis*, one about war in general, *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, and one, *At Sea*, which seems to be an allegory, and a rather gloomy one at that, on the state of Britain today.

Here the application to such material of the techniques familiarized in post-Ionesco comedy is perfectly managed. In

Mutatis Mutandis, for example, we have a comedy, and a funny one, of gradual revelations, growing more and more outrageous: a new father has to break the news progressively to his wife that their baby son has green hair, a tail, three eyes, and so on. He is, in fact, a mutant; when he was conceived 'it was late summer, and the early chrysanthemums were already tapping on the window; the swallows were calling to each other and the sky was patterned with rocket trails . . .' The latter point is not insisted on – this is a comedy and everything is suitably absurd (as well as Absurd) – but it is there, colouring everything and making us reflect, with salutary discomfort, that perhaps, after all, it is not so absurd as it seems. Similarly with *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, in which a sinister barman and barmaid compel a strong, healthy soldier just back from the war to re-enact and in some strange way to assume all the injuries he has inflicted on others, until he limps away, old and shattered; and with *At Sea*, in which one man discovers that the pleasure cruiser he is on is sinking and the other passengers will do nothing about it, conspiring to ignore the situation while 'Rule Britannia' blares over the ship's loudspeakers. The central character in both is placed in a position both funny and uncomfortable; no explicit moral is drawn in either, but the playwright's intention emerges clearly in the only legitimate theatrical fashion: from the action itself, not from any extraneous gloss on the action.

The method is shown at its most subtle in the last part of the sequence, *Little Brother*, *Little Sister*, which is by far the longest of the four plays (too long, in fact, for its context, since it over-weights the programme and consequently loses some of its effect, though in itself it is arguably the best section). The situation here could hardly be simpler; two *enfants terribles* (in the Cocteau sense of the term), an adolescent boy called Sir and an adolescent girl called Madam, live with an incredibly ancient and crabbed cook, and have been living for as long as the children can remember, in a deep shelter insulated from a world which probably no longer exists. Behind the forms of respect, Cook rules them both with a rod of iron (or, to be more precise, a shining steel chopper), but she is having more and more trouble keeping them in line as all three of them grow older. The children are

discovering sex – Sir finally uses it with devastating effect on Cook – and longing to escape, and from their intricate relations with Cook, her determination to stay where she is, and her garbled reminiscences of the world before the last warning, the play is gradually built up. Nothing is overstressed, nothing is hurried. The action takes its time to develop, and allows Campton room to establish his characters as individuals still, even in their extreme predicament (an ear for speech-rhythms hardly inferior to Pinter's is a great help here).

This playlet, in fact, suggests that Campton will be well able, when he wishes, to break away from the one-act form and write a good original full-length play. In most of his other recent works there has been little chance to build up character, and that has not been any important part of their purpose: more often than not the people in them have been required merely to be comic puppets trapped in terrifying situations, and only occasionally, as with the teacher and Miss Europe in *Then . . .*, have they been permitted to grow beyond these limits. In *Little Brother*, *Little Sister*, however, the author's touch is sure in dealing with something as difficult and intangible as the dawn of adolescence: the uneasy, semi-incestuous relationship between Sir and Madam is exactly caught and so is the strange, casual routine of their lives, with the needs and desires of an adult world already beginning to break up the uncomplicated patterns of childhood play. Sir's cadenza of sexual experiment, too, when he realizes all at once that sex has placed in his hands an unexpectedly potent weapon against the hitherto impregnable Cook and, feeling his way at each step, he makes verbal love to her with whatever snatches of half-forgotten love songs and romantic clichés he can summon up from years of her own desultory conversation, is brilliantly accurate at once on a literal and a metaphorical level. Literally it is a totally credible reaction in this specific situation, but it also has the force of a metaphor for that groping discovery of sex first of all through the experiences of others (as yet beyond one's own) for which one must use the vocabulary of others which is part of every adolescent's early experience.

Since *Four Minute Warning* Campton has written a number of

revue sketches along much the same lines as his plays, most notably 'Table Talk' in *On the Brighter Side*, in which a wife talks to her husband over the dinner-table, inventing wilder and wilder tales about herself and the neighbour while he, oblivious, continues to read his seed catalogue, and 'Yellow in the Autumn Sunlight' from the Nottingham Playhouse revue *Second Post!* in which an old man is little by little disillusioned about his favourite view when a firm young woman forces him to put on her glasses and recognize that the daffodils he so admires are only brick council houses gleaming yellow in the autumn sunlight. He has also completed a new comedy for Stephen Joseph, and his next work is a full-length play commissioned by Oscar Lewenstein. Sooner or later, and probably sooner rather than later, he is bound to make his mark on London audiences. Up to now the production of his plays almost exclusively in the North has prevented him from receiving the attention he certainly deserves from the national critics and the more influential members of the theatre-going public, but this omission must surely soon be remedied. His voice is individual and deserves to be heard.

MORE PLAYWRIGHTS IN THE PROVINCES

OF THE OTHER DRAMATISTS who have first made their mark out of town, easily the most interesting are James Saunders and David Perry. James Saunders has an unexpected background for a new dramatist: born in Islington in 1925, he is a chemistry teacher by profession, and took up dramatic writing as a spare-time hobby while studying for a science degree at Southampton. He has not yet established a consistent style and personality as a dramatist, and this has probably militated up to now against his wide recognition, since critics like above all to know where they are with a dramatist and what they can expect of him. Most of his early works, generally one-acters, are written in an unmistakably post-Ionesco style (in its published text one of his best-known plays, *Alas, Poor Fred* is actually subtitled 'a duologue in the style of Ionesco', in tacit recognition, no doubt, of the truth in what the critics said about it). But for his first arrival in the West End, with *The Ark*, the style was much clearer and more traditional; whether this should be interpreted as a new development or a divagation remains to be seen.

Three of Saunders's plays have been broadcast on the Third Programme, *Dog Accident*, *Barnstable*, and *Alas, Poor Fred*, but it was with *Alas, Poor Fred* as produced in-the-round by Stephen Joseph's Studio Theatre group that he first made a distinct impression. In this the Ionesco influence is, in fact, very marked, and the idea of the play is very similar to that of Ionesco's *Amédée*: a husband and wife talk at length, and for much of the time at odds, about Fred, who was apparently cut in half at some time in the past, but on whom otherwise there seems to be little agreement, even to the question of what he actually looked like. Gradually it becomes clear that Fred is their love and life truly together; it is guilt about the emotional dismemberment of their marriage which keeps husband and wife constantly reverting to the subject, she, at least, with more than a little regret. Of the two characters we see (as opposed to the long-absent Fred) she

is the more important, and in two of the key episodes we are allowed to see things through her eyes: one in which, her husband asleep, she takes off all her clothes (in mime) and performs a provocative dance in front of him, and the other when she builds up an elaborate semi-masochistic fantasy about her husband while he is out for a walk. The result, though evidently in some ways derivative, has considerable freshness and life on its own account: in particular Saunders's handling, *à la* Ionesco, of flat conversational clichés in such a way that they build up to something far from flat and cliché is masterly.

Much the same sort of qualities, in the same sort of situation, occur in his earlier play *Barnstable*, which was broadcast in 1959 and staged at Ealing in 1960 in a group of three one-act plays under the title *Ends and Echoes*, the other plays being *Committal* and *Return to the City*. Here again the title character never appears: he is a mysterious entity in the background, shooting thrushes on the lawn of Dr and Mrs Carboy's garden. The dialogue, too, takes up an accepted pattern of clichés, in this case those of pre-war drawing-room comedy, and works a number of ingenious variations on them: the setting is a drawing-room with French windows, and all the characters come from stock: the platitudinous and unhelpful clergyman, the kindly, absent-minded doctor and his worrying, scatter-brained wife, the awkward overgrown schoolgirl daughter, always apologizing for her 'absolutely fatuous and idiotic' behaviour, and the maid, always on the point of giving notice. But this time these fugitives from Esther McCracken country are placed in a fantastic modern context, with the house falling unnoticed about their ears, *Barnstable* shooting thrushes from the west wing, and no one able even momentarily to communicate with anyone else. Again there is the consistent development of a dramatic symbol which is never defined and explained, but from which a clear meaning, or group of meanings, gradually emerges: not so much *Barnstable* this time (he may or may not be God, but the point is not insisted on) as the house, which presumably represents the safeness and solidity of upper-middle-class life in the thirties being gradually eroded and collapsing while those who live inside the system never notice what is happening around them.

In *The Ark* (produced at the Westminster in 1959 and subsequently included in the Studio Theatre's repertory) Saunders turns aside from this sort of oblique comment to tackle directly a major question: that of human responsibility and divine justice (if such a thing exists) in the face of imminent world catastrophe. The play offers a new and disturbing interpretation of the story of Noah, in which the central character becomes Shem, the awkward brother. Noah is rigidly righteous and fiercely inhuman: convinced of his own rectitude, he is not interested in the fate of the rest of humanity. Japhet is just but not entirely blameless; he falls prey to the sensual temptations represented by Shem's wife. Ham is a good-natured simpleton, happy just to do what he is told without question. But Shem cannot so readily dissociate himself from the plight of humanity: God made them as they are, and how can He then so readily condemn and abandon them? Anyway, Shem would rather die with the condemned than survive with his hypocritical family, and in the end he has to be overpowered and carried into the ark by force. (For the in-the-round version Saunders wrote a new last scene showing the brothers leaving the Ark after the Flood and each going his own way.)

All this is argued out directly and logically, without compromise, and the play conclusively demonstrates that Saunders has a talent (though not perhaps so individual a talent) for the neo-Shavian theatre of ideas and not very much action as well as for the more oblique mode of Ionesco. Perhaps the argument does not seem always to sort quite with our emotional reactions to his characters: a modern audience cannot help identifying to a certain extent with Shem, and yet the argument seems to lead finally to the conclusion that Japhet, the unlovable *homme moyen sensuel* who finds it easier to take refuge in action and not ask too many questions, is in some way nearer the right than Shem is. But then, if there is an ambiguity in the values here, that, too, is the prerogative of the modern playwright, for whom there are almost inevitably no constants, no fixed standards of reference against which human actions and aspirations can be measured.

The tone and mood of *The Ark* is taken up again in the third section of *Ends and Echoes*, *Return to a City* (the first, *Committal*, is a slight and amusing near-monologue by a Civil Servant faced

eternally with the problems of a pathetic but determined intruder called Wall, who persistently bounces back however many other departments he is passed on to). In *Return to a City* we are shown the aftermath of a widespread catastrophe instead of, as in *The Ark*, its prelude. Apparently alone amid the ruins, a man and woman are living out a dreary and apathetic life in a city destroyed some fifteen years before – exactly how and by whom we are not told, for the event, whatever it was, seems to have affected their memories. There is another inhabitant, however, an optimist whom the man meets on a hunting expedition, but he is optimistic for much the same reason that the others are pessimistic: he, too, is a fatalist and believes that nothing can be done, but extends this to the belief that nothing matters, whether things get better or worse, or just stay as they are. Finally the son of the old couple comes back, having been preserved somewhere with his faculties intact – both his memory and his ability to feel grief at the state of complete impotence to which his parents and their world have been reduced. If they are the direct sufferers of catastrophe who have undergone at least a spiritual death, he is Shem from the Ark, still concerned, still able to feel for them, and still ready to hope that there must be some way for life to begin again.

Saunders is clearly a man with ideas and the dramatic technique to present them, but he has not yet quite found his own voice to express them in. Meanwhile, however, he has written a number of plays both varied and technically accomplished, which is something, if not all one could ask.

Unlike Saunders, David Perry, whose double bill *Stuff and Nonsense* and *The Trouble with Our Ivy* was staged at Hornchurch in 1960 after *Stuff and Nonsense* had been produced on B.B.C. Television, has much in common with a number of other young writers as far as background is concerned: he is yet another dissatisfied actor turned dramatist. Born in 1928, he spent much of his life in Paris, and had virtually decided to settle there, when circumstances made him return to England in 1954. After a few months doing nothing very much he decided to take his Paris conservatoire training in both hands and embark on an acting career in England; this he did initially by settling with a com-

pany which played mainly North Country farce in Leeds. He began writing in 1958–9, when he decided it would be a good idea to occupy the time between telephone calls with something, and the result was *Stuff and Nonsense*, written originally as a stage play, acquired by B.B.C. Television and promptly shelved for nearly two years until the director Brandon Acton-Bond took a fancy to it and decided he must put it on.

Subsequently the play was staged in a double-bill at Hornchurch, acquired for a West End production and also translated into German for production in West Berlin. It is a fantastic comedy with gruesome overtones about a girl called Jane Pimble who loves her pets (and she can make a pet of anything that moves and breathes) with a suffocating tenderness which pursues them even after death. And if pets can be made as good as new by grandfather's feats of taxidermy, so her harrassed family argue, why no other things, other *people* – like the young man who finds the Pimbles a little too much at close quarters and shows signs of backing out of his engagement to Jane, for instance? It has, after all, happened before, when her previous escort fell down the cellar stairs and broke his neck. The strange household of the Pimbles is not without a suggestion of Pinter, but despite the basic 'sickness' of the joke everything is much less sinister than in his work; Perry's personal contribution (apart from a minute regard for the texture and rhythm of his dialogue which places him, if placed he must be, somewhere between Pinter and Mortimer) is the great amiability which irradiates his writing. One senses, indeed, a more than sneaking sympathy on the author's part for the Pimbles, with their conservatism so ingrained that there is among them a feeling almost of relief when anything so unnatural and unpredictable as a living new-comer is reduced to permanent immobility and ranged alongside the innumerable stuffed birds and fish and furry animals which line their walls.

The Trouble with Our Ivy, which was written immediately after *Stuff and Nonsense*, is much more violent in its implications, and indeed in what actually happens on stage. One long crescendo, it is set in motion quietly enough when the Chards, in obscure revenge for the fate of Ivy, who died three years before beneath

the wheels of the up-train to Waterloo, plant in their carefully prepared garden a 'vegetable volcano' in the shape of a rare tropical ivy filched from a hothouse at Kew, which will put an end once and for all to the pretensions of their genteel neighbours the Tremblows basking in the sunlight amid their Betty Uprichards. This it does, but it also puts paid to much more, engulfing the whole suburb and slowly crushing the semi-detached houses in which the Chards and the Tremblows live while they, inside, work out their differences in a wild climax of violent action. In the Hornchurch version, which Perry prefers, there are only the four characters, but in an earlier version subsequently televised by A.B.C. 'Armchair Theatre' there is also a fireman to whom the final word goes: as the Chards and the Tremblows literally tear each other to pieces on the floor and the building crumbles about them, he puts forward a wistful appeal: 'Couldn't we just sit down quietly round a table and talk things over?' This gives a certain colour to the idea that there may be a very general political allegory involved, but Perry feels that if it is there it is only an incidental and should not be in any way emphasized.

Perry's next play, *Little Doris*, was written directly for television, and involves the same casual, common-sensical approach to fantastic material, the same rather gruesome sense of humour. Again there are two families whose paths cross, though this time on the whole their meeting is fortunate. The scene is largely a run-down boarding-house at Yarmouth, where Auntie Flo, a terrible relative the wife feels they have to do right by, has systematically taken over and driven away the regulars. Into the life of this family come another married couple with a mysterious box in which, we have gradually discovered, there is a creature called Little Doris, the monstrous offspring of a sea-lion in the charge of the husband, a keeper at London zoo. As the one family feel a responsibility towards their monster, Auntie Flo, so the other feel responsible for the welfare of Doris; having preserved her from swift disposal at the zoo, they have kept her at home until she grew too large and now they are going to set her loose in the sea. Auntie Flo has other ideas, however; what a nice, profitable sideshow Doris would make in the summer

months. . . . Doris's protectors are ready to fight to the death for her freedom, but in the end it is Doris herself who resolves things in her own way, by swallowing Auntie Flo. Or at least that is what happens at time of writing, but Perry is not altogether happy with the solution and by the time the play appears it may well take quite a different turn.

Perhaps even more than Perry's two earlier plays, *Little Doris* is suffused by his very English sympathy for the odd, the anachronistic and the useless (he is an eager scourer of newspapers and television for cranks and crackpots like the woman who boiled her alarm clocks on *Tonight* to make them go better and the man who had a complete set of railway buffers in his bedroom). In a way, except that they are more sinister, his plays are like dramatic equivalents of Rowland Emmett's stranger cartoons, but more relevantly there is in him much of the spirit of Lear. The names of the Victorian nonsense writers have been bandied about a lot in connexion with the more fantastically-inclined of the new dramatists, usually without much justification, but if the mathematical exactness of Simpson's fantasy does at times suggest some sort of temperamental affinity with Carroll there is no denying also that the creators of *Little Doris* and the *Pobble Who Had No Toes* would recognize each other across the years (not least for their shared sensitivity to words, which in Perry's plays as in Lear's nonsense poems are used with the unerring precision of the born poet).

Perry has recently completed the first draft of a full-length play, *Daniel Fugue's Pipe Dream*, about a village organist who steals the church organ pipe by pipe and re-erects it in his living-room. To judge by his work to date, David Perry will very soon be a name to conjure with.

John McGrath (born 1935) is the only one of the dramatists considered in this book to have emerged by what was, between the wars at least, one of the most normal and respectable routes: activity in university drama. While still an undergraduate at Oxford (and a producer with O.U.D.S. and the Oxford Experimental Theatre Club) he had his first play, *A Man Has Two Fathers*, produced by the O.U.D.S. at Oxford Playhouse. This is an awkward and immature allegory about relationship, involving

a man with two father-figures to choose from, a disreputable tramp and an eminently respectable pillar of the community. First one looks like winning and then the other, until finally he manages to free himself from both (presumably the pulls towards complete rejection of society and complete submission to it) and go off on his own, leaving his two would-be fathers to discover that they themselves are in fact father and son.

The parts of the play which work best are those (more or less irrelevant) tending towards comedy, but unfortunately this hint was not taken up in McGrath's next work, a one-acter called *The Tent*, which was done at the Royal Court on a Sunday night and later broadcast on the Third amid a lot of misleading publicity about the actors' freedom to improvise in performance. Again the theme is responsibility: an Army captain has ordered an Egyptian civilian to be shot in very dubious circumstances in the Suez Canal Zone and then has to argue the resentful private who actually did the shooting into covering up the circumstances in which it occurred. This he does mainly by means of a long and intricate daydream concerning places he and the private might go together. Finally the private decides to cover up, but the reasons for his doing so are never made clear either on an intellectual level or, as presumably intended, on an emotional level, since neither of the characters finally comes sufficiently alive for belief in the relationship between them to become a vital issue.

In his third play, *Why the Chicken*, first produced by the Oxford Theatre Group on the Fringe of the Edinburgh Festival in 1959 and subsequently destined (abortively) for the West End, McGrath returned in the first half to moments of the off-hand irreverent comedy which he had previously shown some talent for in *A Man Has Two Fathers*, depicting a collection of quite believable restless and dissatisfied teenagers whiling away their time in card-playing, quarrelling, and engaging in intricate games and burlesques in a derelict barn on the edge of a new town. But once plot intrudes (did the earnest social worker or did she not push the gang-leader over a cliff in order to repel an attempt at rape brought on by her own coquetry?) the play goes to pieces, forcing its initially credible characters to take up quite incredible positions in obedience to a preconceived and decidedly

artificial system of sociological principles and suppositions. Since then McGrath has written a musical for the Royal Court, a new play and another musical, none of which has yet been seen. The impression his work leaves at the moment is that of a lively if probably minor talent trying to fight its way out of too many ideological strait-jackets. If it can manage to free itself the results might be interesting.

Finally, in this round-up of dramatists who have found most of their productions in the provinces, we should at least mention two wanderers from other fields. First there is Colin Wilson, once celebrated as author of *The Outsider*, who was for a long time the most talked-about unproduced dramatist nearly to reach the British stage. His first play, *The Death of God*, which concerned, we are told, a dispute between two monks inhabiting a monastery which represents the last outpost of religion in a totalitarian world, was refused, amid considerable publicity, by the Royal Court. His second, *The Metal Flower Blossom*, was accepted for production (amid considerable publicity) by the Plymouth Arts Centre, provided they could find the actors for the three main roles, a prostitute, a homosexual, and a devil-worshipper, but such apparently were not forthcoming and up to now it has had only one public reading. Finally, his third play, a twenty-minute one-act imaginary conversation between Strindberg and Dr Otto Steinmetz called *Viennese Interlude*, in which they expound, rather statically and inconclusively, their respective philosophies of life, was produced by Studio Theatre in Scarborough and later in London at the Mahatma Gandhi Hall, so he may legitimately be included in this section. What his future as a dramatist, if any, may be remains, however, very much in the realms of conjecture.

Less problematical is the standing of Doris Lessing, who turned momentarily aside in 1953 from a distinguished career as a novelist to write three plays, *Each His Own Wilderness*, produced one Sunday night without décor at the Royal Court, *Mr Dollinger*, produced at the Oxford Playhouse, and *The Truth About Billy Newton*, staged two years later at Salisbury. These all revealed a serious writer at work, but one with no special aptitude for drama. *Each His Own Wilderness* concerns a long conflict between a mother who takes lovers indiscriminately and

throws herself determinedly into all sorts of progressive causes, and her son who loves no one and believes in nothing; it makes both the characters quite credible individually, but fails to establish their situation at all in dramatic terms, since it offers no reason whatever why they should stay together except that by doing so they provide the playwright with a cut-and-dried illustration of the proposition contained in her title. In *Mr Dollinger* we are offered a sort of colonial *Look Back in Anger* in which a female Jimmy Porter, Jane Woodward, is left in the middle of the stage for most of the time crushing all those around her with a flow of limited and tiresome invective which, one is convinced, would not have anything like as much effect on anything but the clay-pigeons the author has so obligingly set up for her to shoot down. In *The Truth About Billy Newton*, the framework is a fulsome television biography of an angry old man, because of which he is suddenly surrounded by seven relations whose life he has in various ways affected for the worse; all the routine targets of angry young playwrights are paraded, including the horrors of television, politics, publicity-seekers, and even, a final touch of sophistication, other angry young intellectuals too arrogant for their own good. Again the play has excellent things in it, especially in the characterization of individuals, but again it does not stand up as a whole because its dramatic motive-force, the elderly philosopher at the centre, remains unconvincing. Whether Doris Lessing will continue from time to time to try her hand at drama there is as yet no knowing (as I write a new play from her pen, *Play with a Tiger*, is announced for West End production), but on the evidence of these three plays it seems fairly likely that anything she may write for the stage will remain inevitably a 'novelist's play', and therefore, whatever its incidental virtues, in the last analysis unsatisfactory.

In the Air

Recruits from Radio and Television

DURING THE LAST FIVE OR SIX years television has become more and more important to drama in general, not only in offering a valuable testing-ground for new dramatists, but also in forming taste and preparing audiences, almost imperceptibly, for new things. The advantage with television in this respect is precisely what has generally been taken as its main disadvantage: the relatively uncritical approach of the mass audience. This is not to say that they are really 'captive', as superior people like to say: one has only to look at a series of TAM ratings, which record the state of the television set in the testing sample's home every thirty seconds, to find out the speed with which a programme will be switched off if viewers don't like it. But though they know what they like and what they don't like when they see it, they do not on the whole have any marked preconceptions before any given programme begins. A play, whoever it is by and in whatever style it is written, is judged by the same simple but reliable rule of thumb as *Wagon Train* or *What's My Line*: if they like it, if it holds their attention, it stays on; if not they switch to the other channel or even, in extreme cases, switch off.

So when we learn that the record viewing figure for a play to date has been achieved by Harold Pinter's *A Night Out*, with a minimum audience of fifteen million and probably, in fact, nearer eighteen million, that means something. It means, for one thing, that an audience not conditioned in what to expect of a play by the works of Rattigan and Dodie Smith found it by no means esoteric or highbrow, but simply accepted it as gripping entertainment; the new drama could be enjoyed by a vast popular audience without any need for self-conscious assurances that this was a big cultural experience and one must be prepared. There is no doubt that the difference between the general critical and commercial failure of *The Birthday Party* in 1956 and the critical and commercial triumph of *The Caretaker* in 1960 was almost entirely the work of television, which with *A Night Out* and a

new production of *The Birthday Party* familiarized a vast audience with Pinter's style and created the climate of opinion in which his later work could command instant acceptance.

But how did it come about that television, and commercial television at that – after all the horrible predictions about it – could do this sort of thing? Primarily it has been the work, it is not unfair to say, of one man, Sydney Newman, producer of A.B.C.'s Sunday-night series 'Armchair Theatre'. From time to time interesting things have come from elsewhere in the system: A-R was responsible for *The Birthday Party*, Granada for two Clive Exton plays, as well as for a well-meant but not very encouraging series of new plays by new playwrights 'The Younger Generation', in 1961, and the B.B.C. has adopted John Mortimer from sound radio and taken on, rather warily, John Arden and Henry Livings, as well as staging with much publicity their own mildly disastrous series of new plays in 1959–60, which, alas, brought forth only a batch of conventional works by contract writers and three solitary plays of some slight interest: John Whiting's *A Walk in the Desert*, which by his own admission was an unsatisfactorily rewritten version of a play dating from twelve years before; a commercial thriller by Alun Owen, *The Ruffians*, which had been kept lying around for two years until his 'Armchair Theatre' plays were acclaimed, and John Osborne's *A Subject of Scandal and Concern*, which had been rejected first by several commercial companies.

But though 'Armchair Theatre' itself has not invariably been good, since Sydney Newman took over the direction of the series in April 1958 it has never been less than interesting. Newman is a Canadian, born in Toronto in 1917, and his worst enemy would not call him an intellectual, but he has a shrewd eye for talent, which he believes, justly it seems, will ultimately always turn out to be the most saleable of commodities. Since he set out to make the series as far as possible all-British, with every play specially written for television, he has swept into his net almost every notable talent in television drama, either under contract or for a play at a time, and has commissioned plays from Alun Owen, Clive Exton, and Harold Pinter, to name only a few. 'The advantage with Sydney', according to one playwright who has

worked on the series, 'is that once he has decided you've got something he lets you have your head. He may hate your play, but he just says: "O.K. Go ahead, make a fool of yourself; perhaps you'll learn something from it next time." He doesn't hold it against you if he's proved right, but neither does he hold it against you if he's proved wrong, though he'll probably go on to the bitter end muttering "Just wait till you see the notices" or "All right but let's wait for the ratings".'

From the numerous writers who have first made some sort of name for themselves on radio or television I have chosen the four most distinguished for detailed consideration: Alun Owen, who began with radio, went on to the stage, but had his first major success in television; Clive Exton, whose work has been up to now entirely for television; John Mortimer, who found his way to the stage first with a play written for radio and later produced on television as well, and Peter Shaffer, who found a more sympathetic hearing initially in television than in the theatre, his ardent first love. All of them except Shaffer, incidentally, are still active in television, whatever their other current activities; but then by now there are not so many young dramatists of distinction who have not tried their hand at television at least once.

There are, no doubt, other television writers with claims to consideration. I might mention, for example, Peter Nichols who has written, amid a large and varied output of adaptations and originals, several plays like *Promenade*, *Ben Spray*, and *The Reception*, in which a sprightly invention is sometimes a little dampened by the exigencies of working out. Or Ronald Harwood, author of *The Barber of Stamford Hill*, *Take a Fellow Like Me*, and *Private Potter*, which last, though defective on its realistic level, had moments of unusual intensity as a symbolic drama. Or Rhys Adrian, writer by himself of several interesting radio and television pieces and, in collaboration with Julian Pepper under the collective pseudonym 'J. MacReady', of *Big Time*, the most believable picture yet of delinquent teenagers. Or Alan Simpson and Ray Galton, whose best scripts for *Hancock's Half-Hour* are really one-act plays exploiting the dramatic possibilities of the *temps mort* as subtly, one may think

in an irreverent moment, as anything from the new French novelists. Or several playwrights, like Peter Draper and Paul Jones, who tend to be publicized by the companies they work for more than the work itself justifies. But undeniably Owen, Exton, Mortimer, and Shaffer are for the moment the leaders by a wide margin, and the rest will have to be left at a mention; one or two of them might have it in them to produce a masterpiece some time, but meanwhile we can only watch and hope.

ALUN OWEN

IT IS PERHAPS IRONIC that up to now Alun Owen has been known to the public primarily as a television dramatist, and indeed suffered on the occasion of his first West End production simply because several critics who should have known better were all too ready to suggest that though his play had merits, he was of course 'only' a television playwright and could not really expect to break into the legitimate theatre just like that. Irony because his dramatic origins have all been in the theatre, his earliest work to receive a measure of attention was a stage play, *The Rough and Ready Lot*, and he denies ever having set out consciously to write television plays, as distinct from stage plays, at all: 'I write plays. If they are in two or three acts they are stage plays: if they are in one act they are television plays, because what else can you do with a one-act play?'

Even so, the result is that he fits, unwillingly but unavoidably, among those of our dramatists who have made their mark initially outside the theatre. He was born in North Wales in 1926, and spoke nothing but Welsh until he went to school. His parents moved to Liverpool when he was eight, and, like Meme Modryb in *Progress to the Park*, he began to live fully in a predominantly English-speaking society by the time he was ten, so that his Welsh, though fluent, is now, he says, 'a child's Welsh', and English decidedly his first language. On leaving school he did his war service as a Bevin Boy, spending two years in the mines before he returned to civilian life. Here he drifted into the theatre very much by chance; after trying unsuccessfully to get a job on a northern newspaper, he was recommended to try the local rep, was taken on, and continued to work on and off as an actor for twelve years or so, with intervals in which he took other jobs (eight months as a waiter in Paris, for instance). His range of acting activities included, as well as playing straight roles on stage, screen, and television, a period as 'feed' to Arthur Askey, a season with the Groves on television, and appearances as a pantomime dame.

When he began working as an actor in London he felt he needed a 'line', something to distinguish him from the host of young actors looking for work, and with his name and his background the choice was more or less forced on him: he became 'a Welsh actor', and, like Teifion in *Progress to the Park*, discovered the saleability of local colour. But as his works suggest, things are not so simple as that: he is neither completely Welsh nor completely not Welsh, but a mixture, and the conflict between the two principal ingredients of the mixture (to complicate matters his mother was Irish) is one of the recurrent themes in his plays: 'Liverpool and Wales,' he has said, 'they're the two things I really know, and yet I'm not completely at home in either', and the question of divided allegiances, of what Welshness really means and how Wales is best served, is the central subject of *After the Funeral*, as well as cropping up incidentally in various other contexts. Similarly, the conflicts between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, religion and atheism, which also have considerable autobiographical significance, are recurrent in his work, most notably in *Progress to the Park* and *The Rough and Ready Lot*, but hovering in the background of almost everything he has written, particularly *No Trams to Lime Street* and *The Criminal*.

Alun Owen's first impulse to write came when he was thirteen or fourteen, and found expression for some years almost entirely in verse, some of which was published in English and Welsh magazines. His first dramatic work was a serial for children, never produced or even submitted for production, about the French Revolution and the 'Wild Geese' in Ireland, the central character being an unscrupulous Chevalier (later Citoyen) MacDonald. Owen himself has described the circumstances in which his first real play was produced: 'Suddenly I wanted to write just a little episode – one event which came to me – as a drama, so I wrote *Two Sons* and sent it to the B.B.C. They produced it on the Third Programme, and I wrote another and another. It seems silly to say now, but somehow I never thought of anything of mine being rejected while I wrote it: when someone told me after my first four plays had been accepted that I was lucky I didn't know what he was talking about. . . .'

Two Sons was a significant beginning in several ways. The sons of the title are Taff and Cass, later to become more familiar to us as two of the sailors in *No Trams to Lime Street*, and in outline the story of this play is the same as that of the later one, minus the love story of the third sailor, who does not appear in this at all: Taff and Cass go ashore in Liverpool; Taff asserts himself against his bullying father, the ship's first engineer, and Cass has an inconclusive meeting with his father, which reaffirms their absolute inability to communicate with each other. But the treatment differs considerably, not only in its form (inevitably in radio many things must be explained which on television are simply to be seen), but in its style as well. The poetry of the situations is externalized much more – significantly, the trams, childhood symbols of romance and excitement, are still running – and the lengthy narration is composed, very effectively, in a heightened evocative prose slightly reminiscent of *Under Milk Wood*, with the sort of artful eloquence which Owen will henceforth apparently abandon, but actually integrate more closely into the broadly realistic dialogue of his subsequent work.

After *Two Sons*, which was finished in September 1957, Owen began work on two plays simultaneously, one a costume piece, *The Rough and Ready Lot*, and one set in modern Liverpool, *Progress to the Park*, which began its public life as another radio play, though in fact originally written with the stage in mind. Both were completed by February 1959, when *Progress to the Park* achieved the first of its three productions, at the Royal Court one Sunday evening, while *The Rough and Ready Lot* reached the stage at the Lyric, Hammersmith, in June.

Both plays deal with the question which, according to the author, was uppermost in his mind at the time: the religious conflict. And neither, hardly surprisingly, offers a 'solution', for there is no solution. Of *The Rough and Ready Lot* Owen says: 'The battle between Catholic and Atheist is one of particular importance to me, and one in which I was very much involved at the time of writing the play. I wanted to work it out for myself in dramatic terms, but of course I couldn't because there's no ready-made answer, so both had to die in the end while the simple and ordinary survived.'

The form the story takes is a variation of the classic formula 'There was an Englishman, an Irishman and a Welshman . . .'; in this case there are two Irishmen, and they are all mercenary officers in an *ad hoc* revolutionary army advancing towards the capital of a Spanish colony in South America. The period is just after the American Civil War, and they have just moved on south after that in search of another war, somewhere else where they will be paid to fight. Only Morgan, the fanatical atheist Welshman, is really involved: ever since a moment of revelation on the North-West Frontier when he decided that God was the arch-enemy, he has determined that 'wherever this enemy was, this God, and wherever a man was in injustice, invaded, put upon, I would be there and be his brother and fight for him'. But if he is in it for his ideals, Kelly and O'Keefe are simply professional soldiers, and the Colonel has his own plans, seeing this country as the last on earth where he can perhaps find a home.

The crucial point in the campaign is reached, however, in a way that rapidly involves them all. The route to the capital is through a pass, but the pass is blocked by a monastery, scene of a visitation by the Virgin, which the Government forces have turned into a fortress. What shall they do about it? For Morgan the answer is simple; even if God were not the arch-enemy it would be the merest common sense to shell the monastery/fortress out of existence, for if they delay and go round the Government forces will have all the time they want to entrench around the capital. For O'Keefe, equally fanatical in his Roman Catholicism, the answer is equally simple: it would be sinful to touch the shrine in any way, and the fact that the opposition have also sinned by turning it into a fortress in the first place does not alter anything. The Colonel, a Protestant, has no particular feelings one way or the other about the shrine; he recognizes the justice of Morgan's objections, but taking the longer view he sees also that his own chances of winning the love of the natives and being able to make a home for himself at their head as the liberator of the nation hangs in the balance. He may win the war by destroying a shrine the natives venerate, but will they not then always remember him only as its destroyer?

Kelly, the nearest the play offers to a common man, vacillates

eternally, wanting to offend nobody, see everything that happens, and stay safely on the outskirts of any decisive action until the decision has been reached. Naturally, therefore, it is he who survives to become Colonel and lead the army on to victory and peace after O'Keefe has spiked the guns to prevent the shelling, Morgan has loaded a rickety old trophy of a brass cannon, and they have both been killed when it rebounds and blows up (the Colonel, meanwhile, being stabbed by an Indian girl under the mistaken impression that he has ordered the shelling). For it is the simple and ordinary who always survive in this world, as they are the only ones unobtrusive enough not to draw the fire of others.

Not that Kelly is altogether negative: he has his own ideas, and he, like O'Keefe, is a Roman Catholic, though unlike O'Keefe he is no fanatic. And fanaticism is precisely the chief target of the play – not any particular set of ideas, but the carrying of any idea to extremes at which humanity itself is disregarded. O'Keefe boasts of the rigidity and inflexibility of his standards; Morgan is clearly the sort of man who loves humanity at large, but loves it only as long as it seems to him worthy of his love, and will brook no opposition to the idea that humanity must accept unconditionally what he considers best for it. The Colonel also has an *idée fixe*: he is obsessed with the idea of finding a home, and refuses to any decision which may put this in danger – he has chosen the wrong side once before and does not mean to do so again, but it is his indecision about which is the right side that ultimately kills him. However, in a sense he is dead when the play begins, as his long dreamy speech at the end of Act II makes clear, proclaiming him already the world's rejected guest (a reflection on Protestantism, perhaps, or is that reading too much into it?). When the decision about shelling the monastery is taken out of his hands he says: 'I seem to be in a world I can no longer understand, so why should I try to control it?' and ironically it is from another displaced person in the world around him that he receives his death: the Indian girl who stabs him not because of the Christian shrine, but because her Indian god lives in the hill underneath.

The Rough and Ready Lot is virtually unique in Alun Owen's

work in that it is tightly plotted along conventional lines and at the same time highly characteristic in its preoccupations and thoroughly effective on its own level. The main thing most critics had against *Progress to the Park*, which was written at the same time and treats of the same themes, though in a very different setting, was its absence of formal plot construction in this sense. In it, one can see retrospectively, Owen strikes for the first time on the type of organization which has since proved characteristic of his work, particularly in television. The central situation is essentially static, though it does not appear so: it carries inevitably its own solution, or lack of solution, and though people may battle to change things there is finally no way out. Consequently, atmosphere and character interaction are enormously important, character development through the manipulation of a formal plot almost non-existent.

In this case the reason is obvious: again, the conflict is religious, between Roman Catholic and Protestant, and again there just is no solution. Though individuals may try to fight against the principles of the society they live in, ultimately they come back to the prejudices and inhibitions they started out with. So from the beginning it is clear – though the supposition that every dramatic problem must have its ‘solution’ might temporarily blind us to the fact – that there is no solution to the dilemma which faces Mag Keegan and Bobby Laughlin, or there is only one, death, but this Liverpudlian Romeo and Juliet are not going to do anything so grand as to die for love. What gives rise to a sufficient glimmering of hope to make the subject dramatically viable is Bobby’s background: even though he comes from a family of rabid Irish Protestants and has absorbed from childhood all his father’s ravings about the turpitude of the Catholics, he has been at sea and away from parental influence for some time when we first meet him, and he belongs superficially to a more liberated generation in which friendships cut across religious barriers, his three closest friends being a word-intoxicated Welsh writer now settled in London, a stolid Liverpudlian of Welsh origin, and a randy Catholic seaman – one of the opposition and two uninvolved.

Perhaps, after all, then, the long-standing prejudices will be

broken down when he and Mag, his childhood sweetheart, meet again after years forbidden each other's company, and for a while it seems so. But Mag, in her love for him, has been running around in his absence with his friends, talking all the time about him and using them to be near him. They understand that, but he will not – for him it just means that she's easy and he is the fool because everyone has had her except him. But then, after all, what could he expect; what had his father always told him about Catholic girls? In the last act he tries to make love to her, as he might to any girl, swallowing down his reproaches until he has got what he wants, but she senses the falsity – for her this is the greatest insult of all, and she leaves him. He is torn between her and his father, and finally she seems to win a victory in his mind against his father, but Teifion leaves us in little doubt that the victory will be only temporary, that soon he will lose his urge to fight and be back toeing the Orangeman line like an obedient son.

Teifion's despairing final speech draws the conclusion forcibly (in a favourable example of Owen's highest rhetorical style, incidentally) :

No harm's been done? No, you're right, Charlie, come to think of it, no harm's been done at all. Because if you take the long view of things – Bobby's never going to catch up with Mag. Oh no, boy, I can see Bobby – sliding along the lane back to his dad. He'll fumble in his pocket, get out a clove, chew it a bit and get it round his tongue. After that he'll start to sing 'just to keep up his spirits'. And d'ye know what he'll sing? . . . 'The Orange sash me father wore.' Oh, he's a good boy for his dad our Bob is! Oh, He'll study through tomorrow and all the rest of the hot days that are coming up for a hot July. And – comes August, every week-end he'll be off on the bike and across to Wales and with a bit of luck, and Bobby's the boy for luck, he'll find the girl campers from Bolton, waiting for him, ready to drop their morals specially for a week. Well, it's Wakes Week! And after dissipating his strength all the way through August, he'll be in a suitable frame of mind to buckle down to the exams in September and by the time these exams are over it'll be October and he'll be away and life'll go on and on. Good old Bob! October boy! The seas boy! Back to the free-easy riding sea. Anywhere – just to escape from Mag. Oh – she's a demander is Mag. They're all demanders! And anyway, it'll be all right for Mag, 'cos – no harm's been done there, ye know. No! She can lose herself in plates and spoonfuls of scouse. She can get away from her mother's

nagging through the heat of July with the beads of sweat on her upper lip out in the kitchen. But in August, she's got the Holy voyage and her mother's demands will be drowned by the busy gnats of Ireland. The slabs of Soda bread washed down with orange coloured tea. Yes – she'll live through September. Her sex is resilient ! . . . And, by God, this town is resilient! I'm not worried for Mag. October may be a bad month for her, but Mag's not a suicide girl. Despair is outside our Mag. Despair is outside this town, because this town is like an India-rubber ball and it makes us all India-rubber! Throw us on the ground and we'll bounce back! And, Charlie, with any luck at all, tomorrow I'll get on that train, clutching in my hot sticky hand a second-class ticket and brazen me way past Crewe in a first-class seat and he can drop me off at Sloane Street any time at all, son, any time at all. No harm's been done – Charlie – no harm at all.

(It should be mentioned, incidentally, that this speech was cut and all sorts of other modifications introduced for the play's second production, which was at the Theatre Royal, Stratford, and was made to conform closely with the theatre's normal production policy. In the third production, at the Saville, the original text was largely restored, and it is this final text which I refer to here.)

Nothing has been resolved – the situation is much as it was at the outset, except that Mag has more reason to be hurt and Bobby has more material for his prejudices to work on – but a lot has been elucidated. Well plotted the play is not, in any conventional sense; the real action is all crowded into the last act, leaving Act I as an extended prelude (in the Stratford production it was the first two of three acts). But then, it is the point of the play precisely that we should experience the atmosphere of Liverpool, come to recognize the distinctive quality of its religious and social conflicts, while the plot is of quite secondary importance; partly it helps us to understand Liverpool, but more importantly Liverpool is necessary to the understanding of it. And so atmosphere and the interplay of characters whose situation in relation to each other proves unchanged and unchangeable remain paramount: the atmosphere of a charged Sunday morning in the pub, an aimless evening girl-chasing in the park; the relations of the four childhood friends who have, after all, nothing much in

common except having known each other for years, and perhaps do not even like each other very much; their relations individually and collectively with Mag.

In all this, too, the basic pattern of *The Rough and Ready Lot* can be seen, though changed and enriched. O'Keefe finds his obvious ideological counterpart in Mr Keegan and Morgan in Mr Laughlin (though – and perhaps this is a comment on the kinship of all fanaticisms – temperamentally O'Keefe bears a closer resemblance to Mr Laughlin; possibly the fact that O'Keefe was written with the actor Patrick Magee in mind, and Magee actually played Mr Laughlin in the Saville production of *Progress to the Park* may have something to do with it). The Colonel has certain features in common with Bobby, who is also torn between various lines of action and will ultimately be destroyed because of his inability to decide between them, while Mag is in a sense the Indian girl – certainly she is a misfit in this world, being ruled by an antiquated code of her own, the rule of love. And what of Kelly, the representative of ordinary humanity in all the turbulence of *The Rough and Ready Lot*? Where is he to be found in *Progress to the Park*? In Charlie Modryb, surely, who throughout it all keeps his own counsel and looks forward quietly but not unintelligently to the time when he will find the right girl, marry her, and settle down to a normal life without any of the extremes to which religious fanaticism and personal passion lead the rest. He is our standard of normality, and to judge the other characters aright we must measure them against him.

Progress to the Park is richer, in comparison with *The Rough and Ready Lot*, by the addition of two more important figures: Jameson, who as far as the plot is concerned embodies the deliberate malice which is the only weapon of the stupid and unattractive, and Teifion, who acts as a sort of chorus on the action and whom it is tempting to see, given his character, his situation, and many of his utterances, as the author's representative in the play. Teifion, in fact, provides an excellent example of the way Owen's dramatic method works: if we were to judge the play by traditional standards we would have to say that the central theme, the plot if you like, is the love between Mag and Bobby and its frustration by circumstances (in the broader sense of

environment as well as in the more limited sense of mischance). Teifion does not really, except when he reasons with Bobby at the end, exert any decisive influence on this action, and even at the end the point of his intervention is that he himself already knows it to be hopeless. So why should his role bulk so large in the play as written? The answer, and the justification, is to be found in what I was saying earlier about Owen as an 'atmospheric' dramatist: Teifion is essential to Owen's picture of Liverpool as an atmosphere, and in so far as the play is a conversation piece he is undeniably the most interesting conversationalist on the scene. Whether or not he contributes to the plot, his presence increases our understanding of the issues before us and adds enormously to our enjoyment – which, if one is ready to put aside any notion of the well-made play when it patently is not intended to apply, seems more than enough to justify the important role he assumes.

In all this, though, we have been considering the ideas behind Owen's dramatic writing, which are interesting enough, but do not really give more than a hint of the final effect his plays have on us. Owen is not primarily a cerebral dramatist, and his plays present a view of the world more intuitive than reasoned; they hit one, if at all, in the emotions rather than the intellect. If his plays are not well made in the sense that a play by Pinero or Galsworthy is well made, they are well made in the deepest sense of the term: they have a compelling inner coherence of characterization, a fine unity of atmosphere, and an overall consistency of texture in writing and realization. Their structures are free and rhapsodic, governed only by rules inherent in the material, and in his best work plot is replaced by incident and atmosphere – instead of a neat structure of action and counteraction, solid set piece and calculated reversal of fortunes, we are given simply a situation and some tiny incident which allows the characters to interact and reveal themselves. Lines seldom follow each other in the normal functional give-and-take of the theatre; instead the characters frequently talk listlessly, at odds with or scarcely conscious of each other, revealing their natures and relationships or creating an emotional climate instead of pushing forward a fully articulated plot.

Hence, the quality of the dialogue assumes tremendous importance, though not, of course, in the same way as in the works of a more cerebral dramatist like Shaw. It is the impression of reality which counts here – which is not necessarily the same thing as reality itself. (Owen says of the Liverpudlian speech in *Progress to the Park* and *No Trams to Lime Street*, widely commended for its verisimilitude: ‘In fact, no one in Liverpool ever spoke as I make them speak in these plays: it’s just my idea of how, ideally, they should speak, and how I would like them to speak, but far, far away from literal truth.’) Of all the new dramatists Owen has nearly the most acute ear for English as it is really spoken, and the greatest skill at re-creating it in properly dramatic terms (he is equalled, perhaps, by Clive Exton and surpassed only by Harold Pinter): his dialogue often sounds completely naturalistic, yet on closer examination it proves to be the product of the subtlest art, each line being precisely calculated in relation to the play as a whole, from the casual disconnected, apparently irrelevant exchanges of the *temps mort* scenes which Owen, like most of his contemporaries, finds useful for conveying the aimlessness and listlessness which often afflicts his characters, to the quite elaborate eloquence of some of his climatic scenes (particularly where the speaker is Welsh or Irish and therefore more readily acceptable to English audiences as possessing the gift of the gab).

With these subtle and, one cannot doubt, very carefully worked out variations of pace and texture, Owen’s plays make special demands on the director. In the theatre this has been evident enough: of *Progress to the Park*’s three productions (by Lindsay Anderson, Harry H. Corbett, and Ted Kotcheff) only the third was really satisfactory, substituting a sort of poetic realism for the social documentary approach of the first and the sub-Brechtian trappings of the second. Even more is direction important in the cinema and on television, however. Owen’s sole tangle to date with the cinema, *The Criminal*, has not in any case been too happy (except for its enormous commercial success), since he was landed initially with an unsatisfactory story line by Jimmy Sangster, author of numerous horror films, and after the film was completed twenty minutes were removed, including much of what was more characteristically Owen in the original

script – the criminal hero's Roman Catholicism, his relations with his previous mistress after he is released from prison (made completely incomprehensible in the film as shown) and the playing off of the two different levels of sophistication, that of his criminal associates and that of the enigmatic foreign girl with whom he becomes involved. But even more damagingly, what was left – especially the probing study of prison life near the beginning – was mostly thrown away in favour of the director Joseph Losey's own personal brand of cinematic baroque, full of those flashy virtuoso passages of technique which had worked excellently in films like *The Sleeping Tiger* and *Time Without Pity*, where the script had nothing else to offer, but proved all too liable to annihilate anything this script might have to say for itself.

Again, on television the director plays an important part in making or breaking a play. Fortunately four of Owen's five plays for television have been directed by Ted Kotcheff, whose intuitive, exploratory style, perfectly under control without ever falling into the stale predictabilities of the academically respectable *mise en scène*, allows the author his head completely and makes everything look so natural and unobtrusively right that one is hardly conscious that the play is being directed at all. This is just right for Owen's work, since the illusion of reality plays an important part in its ultimate effect and anything which tends to break into this illusion is destructive. This is particularly so in the detailed handling of dialogue, as one television production not by Ted Kotcheff, *The Ruffians*, demonstrated. *The Ruffians*, though actually transmitted after the trilogy of plays which made Owen's name, was written quite early on – just before the first, in fact – in response to a B.B.C. commission, and then shelved for nearly two years. It is a thriller about an escaped convict who returns to terrorize a pub run by his brother-in-law while waiting to see his wife and force her, if he can, to come away with him, and was intended by Owen as an 'entertainment' in the Graham Greene sense of the term, not to be taken too seriously. Any effectiveness it might have had on this level, however, was destroyed by the completely uncomprehending production: in the very first scene, for example, which shows the publican opening up his pub, exchanging a few desultory words with the potman,

and generally waiting for the evening to begin, the casual exchange of aimless conventional formulas used by the author to suggest the slack, routine feeling of a normally uneventful evening before anything notable happens went for nothing, since all the lines were snapped out in a clear-cut stagy to-and-fro, for all the world as though this were early Somerset Maugham we were seeing. The result was that what was being said became literally incomprehensible, or at best began to sound like N. F. Simpson, as the presentation systematically implied a formal, logical connexion between consecutive remarks of the two characters which was evidently not there at all.

In contrast, the three plays written for Sydney Newman's 'Armchair Theatre' series, all directed by Ted Kotcheff, have managed things so successfully that they have persuaded the unwary to accept the powerful illusion of reality for the real thing and class Owen, rather rashly, as a semi-documentary, slice-of-life dramatist – an idea that will not for a moment stand the test of close examination, which shows exactly how much is the result of simply recording observations and how much is imaginative re-creation of the most artful and highly selective sort. The first of the three, *No Trams to Lime Street*, in fact, provides the perfect example of this, since the one thing one or two critics found hard to swallow, the extraordinary coincidence that the sailor on his way to light a candle for a dead shipmate in his home town (Liverpool) should become involved unwittingly with the same man's widow, was as it happens the only thing in the piece which was 'true' in the most basic, literal sense. The play is a very cunning combination of two stories, that from *Two Sons*, concerning Cass and Taff and their relations with their fathers, and an experience retailed to Owen by a sailor friend to whom it actually happened. Originally this latter was a broadly comic tale of a sailor who liked girls with fat legs, but since there were strong elements of comedy in the other story, particularly in Taff's gesture of defiance towards his father when he drinks a double brandy and smokes a cigar just to show that he doesn't think much of the occupation, the story of Billy Mack and Betty has been shifted in tone from Rabelaisian farce to something much more tender and elusive.

The second of the Liverpool plays, *After the Funeral*, is 'Liverpool' only at a distance, in that two of its principal characters are Liverpool-Welsh. Again it deals with the relations between various generations of a family, though this time most importantly between grandfather and grandsons. The funeral is that of Captain John Roberts's daughter-in-law, and the question which arises is, where will he live and who will look after him from now on? The obvious candidates are his two grandsons, Dave and Morgan. Morgan has special reasons for wanting him, since he is a romantic Welsh nationalist, a professor in South Wales who has learnt Welsh, despises his Liverpool upbringing, and sees in his grandfather a heaven-sent opportunity for establishing beyond doubt his Welsh background in the eyes of his colleagues. Dave, on the other hand, wants him simply from personal affection; even the belated revelation that the Captain is not really his grandfather at all makes no difference. ('If you feel a man is your grandfather, he is. . . .') The material of the play is clearly autobiographical to some extent: Owen admits that Captain Roberts is a portrait of his own grandfather and that Dave is in many ways himself, though people have also found much of him in Morgan and he supposes that this must be so whether he meant it or not. In effect, then, as one might guess even without the author's confirmation, *After the Funeral* shows yet another dramatized working out of a conflict in Owen's mind: as *The Rough and Ready Lot* and *Progress to the Park* dramatized the religious divisions, so this play dramatizes the pull between the realistic Liverpoolian and the Welsh romantic, though admittedly with the dice loaded in favour of the former.

In the third of the group, *Lena, Oh My Lena*, another theme which clearly has an autobiographical significance is taken up – that of the character whom life carries away from his original class or milieu and the nostalgia he may occasionally feel for things as they were. In *Progress to the Park* this is evidently happening to Teifion by virtue of his new life as a writer in London; already it is making him something of a stranger in Liverpool, among the people he knew as a child, but there are so many other reasons for the separation which have more relevance to this particular play (being Liverpool-Welsh among Liver-

pool-Irish, and religiously uncommitted in a hotbed of religious contention) that this specific difference is hardly noticeable. In *Lena, Oh My Lena*, though, it becomes central: Tom, a Liverpool student, has been cut off from his childhood and background by education, but feels an enormous longing to belong somewhere, which expresses itself in a determination to get back to 'real life' by taking vacation work in a factory among ordinary working people. (He suggests that his own background is working class, but this is rather doubtful, and in the printed text Owen confirms our suspicions by characterizing him as 'from a lower-middle-class family which he has romanticized into the working class'.) The division in his world is symbolized, neatly but not too obtrusively by the division between the factory and the 'bohemian' student camp of pea-pickers up the road. Tom resents the fact that he belongs with the pea-pickers, who are not 'real'; he wants to believe that his real place is with the factory workers, but the truth, as he finally discovers, is that he does not understand them. The sheltering effect of education has softened him, leaving him naïve and defenceless in personal relationships, and when he becomes involved with Lena, a factory girl who, on the rebound from a quarrel with her regular boy-friend Glyn, is ready enough for a bit of fun to make Glyn jealous, he at once romanticizes the whole business into a great love, and is then cruelly disillusioned and humiliated by his own inability to deal with the situation. Finally he begins, painfully, to learn his lesson: even if the students up the road are stuck-up and artificial, for better or for worse they are 'his sort' now, and he must come to understand where he belongs.

Knowing where one belongs and coming to terms with the realities of one's own life and nature, living in the present rather than the past: these are the recurrent themes in these three plays. One can hardly do better than to quote Owen's own statement on the point in his introduction to the printed texts:

In *No Trams to Lime Street* the three sailors are searching for themselves. Cass and Taff have to get over their fathers before they can live their own lives, Billy Mack has to find the courage to dismiss his dead friend Ben Hogan [Betty's husband] before he can be himself. In *After the Funeral* this problem is heightened for the Roberts brothers, because

the death of someone you love means a time of realization. In *Lena, Oh My Lena* I tried to show that physical attraction is not enough to gain admittance to a world you don't really belong to any more. In the three plays the characters are evading the truth about themselves. This is a common failing – so common I don't condemn it, that would be too easy; but I feel it is important enough to be portrayed, if it helps to bring about more understanding of this sort of problem. When in *No Trams to Lime Street* Cass buys a bottle of whisky for his father, he doesn't solve anything: but he tried, and there's still hope. . . .

This passage taken by itself, though it explains well enough what he is about, might seem to imply a rather sticky and sentimental approach on the part of the playwright, but that would be far from the mark: if there is a danger in Owen's enormous tenderness towards his creations, his longing to show first and foremost their potentialities for tenderness and compassion, it is fully countered by the unswerving truthfulness of his observation. Whatever gentleness and love there may be in life he shows, but no more than that, and he shows it as hard won in a world where insensitivity and cheerful savagery are much more the rule. With his impeccable ear for the cadences of spoken English (especially Liverpool-English or Welsh-English) he can conjure up formidably the illusion of reality, but this would count for little were not his observation of the way real people really behave equally acute. Seldom, for instance, can the true flavour of factory life have been captured so accurately as in *Lena, Oh My Lena*, with the little songs that rise out of nothing and die away, the outbursts of noise and horseplay to break the monotony, the often shallow matiness which does not exclude genuine affection, but on the other hand permits as well an amount of teasing and cheating severe enough to be cruel were they not on the whole so uncalculating. Nor has any other dramatist writing today a more mature, unsentimental grasp of feminine character, demonstrated most notably in the tough, sensible working girls portrayed by Billie Whitelaw in *No Trams to Lime Street*, *Lena, Oh My Lena* and *Progress to the Park*, all of whom are totally believable as self-possessed, fully adult *women*, something in which English drama is otherwise singularly lacking.

And finally, important especially in television, Owen has the

gift of intimacy, which is more than just putting two people close together, alone, in front of a camera: his characters are genuinely emotionally involved with each other. Sometimes it is in love, sometimes in resentment, often in the tension set up between the two, but whatever it is that binds them they do really touch, they communicate, because it is part of his poetic vision of the world that they should (whereas for most of our other dramatists it is the essence of their vision that people cannot communicate and do not do so). And herein lies the overriding internal unity of his plays: the relations of his characters with each other have an unmistakable inner emotional force and poetic necessity which provides the rock-hard centre of each play's world and from which follows, almost, it seems, automatically, the outer coherence of structure, mood, dramatic progression, and so on.

After these three plays, which represent, as anyone familiar with *Two Sons* or *The Rough and Ready Lot* would already have realized, only one side of Owen's talent, he obviously felt the need for a change, and in his next television play, *The Ways of Love*, he turned to a much less intimate, interior style; though the same problems as were central to the 'Liverpool trilogy' – finding one's own identity; coming to terms with the present, with reality – recur, it is in a very different context, that of sophisticated literary life in London, and with many additions and modifications, as befits the broader canvas. The characters are not altogether strange, however, and their remote backgrounds are still recognizable. The central character, for instance, the Welsh writer David, might almost be Teifion seen from the London end of his life, a writer fighting for survival in an unfamiliar world. The question at the forefront of his more idealistic friends' minds is: Will success spoil David Enoch? Will the fact that his true, sensitive, sincere first novel has become an overnight best-seller change him from the simple, idealistic Welsh lad he has always been into yet another smooth commercial writer who has sold out to films and television? But before very long it becomes clear that David was spoilt, in their sense of the term, long before he became a success. He is perhaps a great writer – we have no way of knowing, and the question is not important to the play. What is important is that he believes

wholeheartedly in his creative abilities and will do anything to make the money which will allow him to go on doing what he must do. 'No matter what I do for money, it won't affect my real work or me. It's a matter of confidence. You see, I have confidence in my creative ability. . . .'

One of the things he has done is to write a novel, a very good novel by all accounts, with the intention that it should be a success, and allowed the idea to get abroad that it is autobiographical to help the sales. ('People don't want works of fiction any more. They hate to think that the writer has a richer imagination than they have.') This is what really upsets his friends, especially the idealistic left-wing Charlie; as long as the book was 'true' for them they were ready to be moved by it, but if it is not true then they have been deceived in some way. ('I thought that the book was a sort of epitaph,' says the more susceptible of the women desolately; 'Well, so it was,' replies David, 'but to poverty, not love.') And if it is true in another sense – in the sense that they and their feelings have gone to its making – well, that is even worse; it is unethical.

Here we come to the central questions: the artist's responsibility to himself; his responsibility to the artist in him before his responsibility to the man. How did it feel, for instance, to figure in a book by Denton Welch? More important, had he the right to put you there? David Enoch is thoroughly unpleasant, in many ways, but he also speaks the truth uncomfortably often: he may be ruthless, but it is the ruthlessness of self-protection; it is himself as much as anyone else that he sacrifices on the altar of his art, but he arises phoenix-like from the ashes while everyone else merely gets burnt. In other words, one problem for which he seems to have sought (and found) a solution is much the same as that in which the characters of the Liverpool trilogy are involved; that of finding his own identity, and having found it, of keeping it intact. His solution may be ruthless; he might claim that as an artist he has special privileges, or he might well not bother to advance any such line of special pleading – he does what he does because he wants to and because he has to.

Though *The Ways of Love* is recognizably from the same pen and on the same sort of theme as Owen's other plays, in certain

respects, as we have seen, it represents a deliberate break-away from the constricting mould of the regional playwright producing slice-of-life dramas on working-class themes into which the critics have shown some signs of trying to force him. By temperament, perhaps, Owen is basically a realist, but he can use his realistic style in many ways far removed from that implied by his reputation as a 'working-class dramatist': in *Two Sons* he carried off successfully an essay in slightly Dylan-Thomasy, overtly poetic evocation, in *The Rough and Ready Lot* he achieved a costume play of remarkable authenticity and sobriety, and in *The Ways of Love* he showed that he could deal convincingly with the sophisticated and metropolitan as well as the plain provincial – though the early scene at a press reception rang slightly false, the rest of the play, in which a number of intelligent, articulate people get together and proceed systematically to tear each other apart, came off to perfection.

His next play, *The Rose Affair*, carries the rebellion (if deliberate rebellion it be) still further, marking his most decisive departure yet from the naturalistic end of the realistic scale. This time the form is an undisguised parable, a modern version of the Beauty and the Beast story. The Beast, Mr Betumain, is a tycoon who lives for most of the time behind masks because he suffers from a psycho-somatic condition which causes his face to swell and distort itself into something hideously grotesque whenever he is emotionally disturbed (generally with feelings of guilt engendered, directly or indirectly, by his money). Beauty is Bella Shane, the daughter of an employee of his who embezzles, almost inadvertently, some funds from a rose nursery he owns, and she wins him over mainly by forcing him into an unwilling admission that he is a man and has needs like a man (her, for example) and lifting the weight of guilt from his shoulders by taking over his money. ('Give it to me, girls understand guilt. Eve passed us on a secret, how to live with guilt and other things, then make them into a feminine mystery to bind men to us.') The drama is conceived on broadly non-realistic lines, full of fantastic touches of slightly surrealist humour, and its dialogue is written in a curiously effective sort of mannered and formal prose, not without a hint here and there of Daisy Ashford, which

gives the viewer the odd impression that what he is seeing is at once highly sophisticated and unmistakably basic, like one of those paintings by le Douanier Rousseau in which solid suburban Frenchmen in top hats and frock-coats form a perfectly credible part of exotic landscapes filled with equally solid and literally rendered tropical plants and mythological figures. It is a diversion, perhaps, but a diversion of exceptional charm and skill.

Both *The Ways of Love* and *The Rose Affair* have had, very properly, their admirers, but a slight feeling of resentment still seems to linger among critics, and public. Clearly, with the solid achievement of the Liverpool plays and *The Rough and Ready Lot* to establish him already as one of the most original and accomplished writers of his generation, Owen is determined to convince them that any stereotyped picture of him they may be cherishing is too limited and limiting (his next plays at time of writing are going to be a half-hour piece, *Dare to be a Daniel*, about an arrogant and overbearing headmaster's conflict with a teacher on his staff and an ex-pupil; *You Can't Win 'Em All*, a drama about a cockney seaman who gets involved with a group of Latin American rebels simply for the money in it and is then forced by his situation into some rather difficult moral and emotional stock-taking; and *Quest for Kevin*, a Liverpool-set entertainment thriller, which will take up the line of *The Ruffians* and manage it, he hopes, rather better). His main difficulty will, no doubt, be to do so and yet remain true to himself, but then as his range seems potentially wider than that of almost any of his contemporaries among the British dramatists, all he needs at the moment is the freedom to continue his explorations without too much interference: on past showing something new and exciting can hardly fail to emerge.

CLIVE EXTON

IF THERE IS ONE thing which emerges simple, clear cut, and consistent from the study of a number of the new dramatists together, it is that there is nothing simple, clear cut, and consistent about them. Every one is in some way an exception to any generalization one may make; each has his own personal quirks, his own unexpected allegiances. Clive Exton, for example, though not specially conscious of any influences at work in his plays, regards himself as really a very old-fashioned sort of playwright and cites as the only influences he thinks likely 'Ibsen, and especially Strindberg'. As if this were not odd enough in a young man barely in his thirties, he has another claim to uniqueness. Among all the dramatists we have considered he alone has not only never had a West End success with one of his plays, but has never had a play staged at all.

The explanation of this second statement is simple: he has distinguished himself up to now entirely as a television playwright, though among the playwrights at present exclusively wedded to television he stands out as by far the most individual and exciting. Since he began writing he has worked as a complete professional in television, turning his hand (in the early days at least) to anything which offered: contributions to situation series like *Knight Errant*, collaboration with Francis Durbridge on a detective serial *The World of Tim Frazer*, adaptations of Edgar Wallace's *On the Spot* and of H. G. Wells's *Kipps* (this last, however, was a labour of love – somewhat spoilt, for Exton at least, in the execution) and so on. But he has also written seven plays, and with these he has built up a reputation to excel that of many of the stage dramatists we have been considering – some measure, incidentally, of the prestige the once-despised medium of television has been acquiring in the last few years, although, on the other hand, that it has done so is largely the work of Exton and others who have been encouraged to try their hand by A.B.C.'s 'Arinchair Theatre' or by the drama department of Granada.

Exton was born in 1930, educated at Christ's Hospital, and after an initiation into school drama went on to the Central School of Speech and Drama. He says himself that he was a bad actor and determined to get out of the business as soon as he could; the next few years saw him acting intermittently up and down the country with various reps (not to mention interludes in an advertising agency, a dog-biscuit factory and a coffee bar), though he tended to gravitate as far as possible away from acting and towards stage management. Finally he found employment as stage manager and small-part actor with Donald Albery, and settled reasonably happily to this job, except for a growing dissatisfaction at the sort of play he had to deal with. His first step as a playwright was taken around this time, in the simplest way possible; he was complaining, as usual, about the poor quality of the day's drama when his wife, herself an actress, became sufficiently exasperated to throw at him the stock reply 'Well, if you think it's that bad, why don't you do better yourself?' Which is precisely what he set out to do, sitting down to write something which finally emerged as *No Fixed Abode*.

No Fixed Abode was originally meant for the theatre, though Exton now sees it as 'quite unsuited to stage . . . too intimate and uneventful, not sufficiently heightened'. However, by a series of lucky chances he showed it to an actress friend, who showed it to a producer at Granada, and it eventually appeared, with resounding success, on television. The play is, as the author's description suggests, an essay in minute realism, and it was inspired – the background if not the action – by an experience of his own during a lean time after a disastrous repertory season in the West Country. Its scene is a doss-house dormitory and there are just four characters apart from the Guv'nor: Grandpa, Lofty, Corp, and Tich. The play has virtually no plot in the conventional sense – it just allows us to watch the interplay of the characters and learn something of them during the casual contacts of one night. There are Grandpa, a tough, uncommunicative old man just out of hospital, Lofty, a non-union building worker, and two jailbirds, of very different sorts: Tich, a stupid and insecure young man obsessed with the idea of getting on, and Corp, who spent a time in military prison for maiming a

sergeant who had previously debauched his refugee wife. In the second act there is a brief scuffle between Corp and Tich over a pair of shoes Tich has stolen from Grandpa, and then a long conversation between Corp and Grandpa in which they plan to set up business together as buskers, Grandpa taking it all quite seriously and Corp going along with it half wishfully, but perhaps more to please him than anything else. In the morning the proprietor of the doss-house looks like making trouble over the fight and Grandpa panics, denying all connexion with it: Corp then takes all the blame upon himself and leaves. Grandpa's dreams of a companionable future busking are shattered.

The core of the play is to be found in an exchange between Grandpa and Lofty near the end. Lofty has been gently reproaching Grandpa for letting Corp take all the blame:

GRANDPA: I'm an old man, though. I got scared.

LOFTY: I know.

GRANDPA: No, you *don't*. You *don't* know. I tell you I'm an old man. I'm going to die – and nobody won't care. It'll be as if I hadn't lived at all. As if I just hadn't lived.

LOFTY: No, it won't. . . .

GRANDPA: That's why I wanted to do this busking. If I'd done this busking – well – there might be somebody. You know – somebody might see me and one day, when I was dead, they might say . . . 'What happened to that funny old bloke what used to do that dancing with that other bloke? . . .'

LOFTY: Reckon we're all like that, Grandfer.

Here Exton touches for the first time on a theme which recurs, in one guise or another, in nearly all his plays, but especially in the realistic trilogy which first made his name, *No Fixed Abode*, *The Silk Purse*, and *Where I Live*: the desperate need of man in modern society to feel he belongs, the endless search for a context, a hierarchy, a fixed standard by which he can see himself set in a clear relationship with other human beings. In *No Fixed Abode* all four characters are in some way uprooted: Tich by his determination to establish a new and superior position for himself, dishonestly if necessary (and, of course, more immediately by his spell in prison); Lofty by his mysterious 'principles'

about union membership, which keep him roaming the country in search of work and hardly ever able to see his wife and children; Corp by his experiences with the sergeant in Germany and by the subsequent and quite incidental death of his wife; Grandpa simply by the fact of being old, having outlived his contemporaries and finding himself left with only one son who does not care whether he lives or dies.

Metaphorically, as well as literally, they have 'no fixed abode', and their restlessness and malaise is seen by Exton as in many ways symptomatic of the general predicament of twentieth-century man. In an interview he gave to *The Times* shortly after the production of *Where I Live* he made the point explicit in answer to the question, would he agree that his view of life was basically pessimistic?

I think it must be: certainly it comes out that way in my work, though I must admit that I do not know why it should be – that's something I am still working out for myself. The idea at the back of much that I write, it seems to me, looking at it after the event, is a regret for established values such as one imagines existing before 1914 – that magic number which always seems to mark the borderline between 'then' and 'now'. The breaking down since then of religious and social rules and classifications seems to have left many people uncomfortably adrift, without an established framework even to react against and break out of. Of course, there is a paradox here, since I personally do not regret the break away from religion and class-stratification – I'm an agnostic, or something, or nothing, and I imagine that I am probably happier than I would be in a more rigidly patterned society – and yet I cannot help recognizing that most of the characters I invent in drama are affected by the malaise which comes from this lack of fixed standards.

In so far as this relates to class as well as to personal relationships, it offers a valuable guide to his next play, *The Silk Purse*. (Actually, the next play he wrote was *Some Talk of Alexander*, a charming light comedy about a retired sergeant-major's wooing of a widowed fruiterer with a difficult son which Exton dismisses at 'not honest . . . an attempt to play safe by giving the public what I supposed they wanted', but this was not produced until some time later.) *The Silk Purse* offers a subtle and significant variation on the traditional drama of parental reactions to a

daughter's marriage 'beneath her'. Mummy and daddy are living in a state of faded gentility in a faded London suburb when Anne comes home with Peter, whom she has secretly married and who turns out, horror of horrors, to be an apprentice copy-writer for an advertising firm, son of an engine-driver and clearly 'unsuitable'. Anne thinks so, too, to a certain extent; though she married Peter because he was a man and a much more interesting one than the products of minor public schools her parents usually thought suitable for her to know, she still wants him to tell her parents, for the time being anyway, that he was at a public school and that his father is a Civil Servant.

Once the truth is out, though, another truth also comes out: that the tensions in the family come from precisely the same thing having happened to the older generation: Doris too married, she believed, beneath her, and has devoted the last thirty years to changing Robert into a gentleman, a sow's ear into a silk purse. It has been a constant strain, he hates her for it, and she remains grimly aware that she has not quite succeeded. There is no simple resolution; Doris and Robert are beyond help but so, too, possibly, are Anne and Peter. Robert regards Anne, in his heart of hearts, as a 'stuck-up little bitch', the fact that it was his hard-earned money which made her so soothing his feelings not a bit. And he may well be right about her; his warning to Peter that she will want to emasculate him in precisely the same way that Doris has already done to himself may well be all too accurate.

But more important even than the obvious social and personal conflicts among the four participants is the evident fact that the standards which are invoked and by which they judge each other are in any case no more than a polite fiction. There is no 'real' system for them to measure themselves against, and the conviction of Doris and Robert that whatever their actual position in the world they are in some quasi-mystical sense superior by virtue of breeding and upbringing to, say, the upstart engine-driver's son is vitiated by their own uneasy half-realization that they are living in a world of fantasy. They continue to cling to it, however, since it is all they have, their only comfort, and even a fictional system to live by is better than no system at all. As

much as any of the drifters in *No Fixed Abode* they have been cast adrift by society and have no way of knowing where they belong except to appeal to the probably imaginary splendours of a vanished age to make their position in a world which really no longer has any use for them at least bearable.

Another character adrift in a world which does not any longer want him is at the centre of *Where I Live*, the third play of this group. His tragedy to begin with is that he has not yet realized the fact: an old man in his seventies, Dad lives with his married daughter, Jessy, and her husband, Bert. He constantly compares Bert unfavourably to his own son, George, whom he worships, though George has never done anything for him. It is not that Bert and Jessy resent the old man so much in himself, though he can be very trying and never understands what a drain he is on their modest resources, but they resent the unfairness of the situation, and Jessy determines that George and Vi must do their share in looking after him. George and Vi are too selfish to agree to this, and in her bitterness Jessy decides that Dad shall find out exactly what sort of person his precious George is. She wants him to go, of course, but more than that she wants him to see the truth about his children and be properly grateful if he stays. What she does not recognize until too late is the hurt she must do her father in bringing this revelation to light, since in the process it must be made clear to him that basically neither of his children wants him, and he is being used, without any consideration of his own feelings, as a pawn in the rivalry between them.

Again we find an insoluble dilemma which really exists only because of the shifting and uncertain codes of behaviour in the modern world. Once, as Exton himself points out, there would have been no question of choice when considering how one should deal with an aged parent, but now, except in such closely knit groups as the Jews and Irish of the East End, there is a choice, and the force of the traditional family duties is purely nominal; they become merely a matter of personal inclination. There is, of course, much more to the play than a simple *pièce à thèse* on this theme; the character of Jessy in particular offers a subtle study of conflicting and in the end mutually exclusive emotions, but the

fact that she lives in a world where her personal feelings in the matter can become such a vital factor in the fate of her father is in itself indicative. Naturally, to depict the situation in these terms may well imply too rosy a picture of the past, but whether the pre-1914 era of security and accepted values ever had any objective reality is beside the point; several characters in the plays *believe* that it did – Robert in *The Silk Purse* and the fanatical central character of Exton's unperformed stage play *The Land of My Dreams* (significant title!) specifically say so, while the older characters are always nostalgic for the past – and as far as the author's own beliefs are concerned, Exton has said, reasonably: 'I suspect that if I had what I think I envy in others, I wouldn't like it – even supposing that it really exists. But then, if one is nostalgic for something which exists only in one's mind, that does not diminish the potency of the nostalgia.'

All the plays Exton had written up to this point have a number of things in common both in subject-matter and in technique. They are all minutely realistic in the sense that though what the dramatist is saying is perfectly coherent (these are no shapeless naturalistic slices-of-life) he never raises his voice or employs any of the normal heightening devices of oratory to say it. Whether or not he is right about *No Fixed Abode* being altogether unsuitable for the stage, it is obvious that it and the other plays (all of which, incidentally, would be quite easy to stage as they stand in that they have little variation of locale, small casts, and do not involve any virtuoso attempts to 'make the most of the medium' of television) would require a very special, intimate sort of theatre, like Reinhardt's Kammerspiele, in which, it is recorded, the movement of a finger had the same effect that the movement of a whole arm had in a larger theatre. But the Kammerspiele of today is obviously television; the television camera can with the greatest ease invest the slightest flicker of an eyelid with significance, and as well as being able to open a play out and give it mobility it can worm its way into a play, moving among the characters with an almost uncomfortable intimacy. Exton explained this function neatly in the interview previously quoted:

Apart from anything else, television offers one such a wonderful

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chance to explore individual characters. People are constantly interesting, just in themselves – look at any unscripted television interview. Naturally in a play one has to organize, heighten, and select, but one can approach the same effect in television drama, concentrating on the medium's intimacy and immediacy. The actors can talk almost face to face with their audience, without raising their voices or exaggerating anything, so that realism is 'natural' to television in a way that it isn't for any other medium. On the stage, for example, as soon as one has to 'project' to the back of the theatre this sort of detailed realism is impossible.

At this time, however, he felt that the distinction between stage and television worked the other way, too, that for him television was limited to the realistic ('I cannot conceive of a television play which is not realistic in style'). But with his very next play, *Hold My Hand, Soldier*, he was himself to provide a striking repudiation of this view.

This strange battlefield drama of the dead and the dying, originally and more aptly entitled *The Sainthood Stakes*, has a cast of only three characters, a desperately wounded officer, a private who finds him and tries to save him, and a corporal who joins them, out only for himself and with just one idea – to save his own skin. The drama is entirely one of personal conflicts, or a personal conflict, the officer being effectively out of it and merely a counter in the battle between the private and the corporal. Both of these, in bold contrast with the characters in Exton's previous work, are conceived in thoroughly non-realistic terms, as a classic opposition of good and evil. The corporal is vicious, pointlessly, self-indulgently, and in the end self-destructively vicious, with a streak of sadism which drives him to torment the dying officer and the private far beyond anything which his avowed single concern for number one would explain (in the end, indeed, he has to admit that his behaviour showed weakness, since he indulged his hate of officers by staying to enjoy the spectacle of an officer dying when prudence would have dictated his flight – a life of complete selfishness too requires its sacrifices). The private is also inexplicable in realistic terms, since judging him at that level one would find oneself asking whether in his situation anyone could be so intuitively,

uncomplicatedly good: he is not conventionally noble, he does not do things on principle, but he has a slogging goodness of heart, an unquestioning, and possibly mistaken – the matter remains in question – feeling for what is right which makes him virtually unassailable.

The conflict between these two opposites is seen at its clearest and purest in the last act, when the officer is dead and the private, having taken over the now badly wounded corporal as his charge, deposits him, protesting and ungrateful as ever, by the fallen crucifix in a ruined cathedral. As the corporal goes on explaining about the sacrifices involved in a life dedicated ruthlessly and unswervingly to the advancement of self the private suddenly realizes the truth: that the people like the corporal, whom he has vaguely envied all his life for knowing what was best for number one and acting decisively on that knowledge while he just stood aside and watched, have not enjoyed their life any more than he has.

I just stood there and I didn't know anything. I just had a sort of vague feeling that I ought not to leave that officer. That it wasn't right. But you *knew*. You knew what to do. You wanted to leave him – then you decided that you'd enjoy watching him suffer, because you hated him. . . . You've made me realize that you haven't enjoyed life any more than I have. You've been so busy being selfish that you haven't enjoyed it any more than I have.

A moment of understanding exists between them; at last they realize that in them the extreme opposites of human behaviour meet, but it is too late, for the corporal is dying, and when the private leaves at the end we have no clear indication whether full communication has at last been achieved or not.

Exton himself is now unhappy about the play, feeling that though it says a number of things which were and are important to him the expression is gauche and the play really needed further work on it before production. There is an element of truth in this: the balance between the realistic side of the presentation and the deeper symbolism is not always maintained with full conviction, and one remains aware, even if the awareness is not particularly disturbing, of a certain disparity between the characters and the relatively realistic setting into which they are

put. The sheer intensity of Exton's vision carries off *Hold My Hand, Soldier* (backed up, of course, by his unfailing technical skill in the invention of lively, believable dialogue and the disposition of his materials to produce the maximum dramatic effort), but sometimes it is a close thing, and a certain amount of concern was felt at the time on the score that he might perhaps be heading eagerly in what would eventually prove to be the wrong direction for his particular talents.

All such fears, however, were dispelled by his next play, *I'll Have You to Remember*, which fused the two modes, symbolic and realistic, into a whole of extraordinary force and power. On the surface George and Milly James are just two derelicts, by-passed by the world, to whom their once resplendent mansion is now little more than a vast and echoing hovel, mouldering and cob-web-filled, in which they must last out the remains of a drab half-life amid the litter of empty milk-bottles and piles of unopened letters. But clearly Exton's plunge into the tangles of overt symbolism in *Hold My Hand, Soldier* has left him with a finer appreciation of the unfathomable depths which are hidden just beneath the fragile surface of civilized life, and as we learn more and more of the two characters' situation they become charged with a quasi-allegorical significance; they are everyone whose present existence is rendered impotent by hopeless brooding on a past beyond remedy.

As the play goes on they grow gradually, these creatures of premature and querulous senility, from colourless pygmies, crouched apathetically in front of the television, to monsters of savage frustration, large enough to fill the whole mansion with the force of their hatred and despair. And the cause of it all is the fate which ten years ago overtook their son John, for which each blames the other. He committed suicide when his wife left him; for George this is because Milly spoiled him and tamed him into a weak, dependent mother's boy; for Milly it is more because George bullied him nearly into a breakdown by forcing him to do everything he considered 'manly' against his inclinations. Consequently they appear to hate each other, but more importantly they hate themselves – the house gradually falling into ruins is the symbol of their own minds tottering on the brink of

insanity as they try to forget and wait for death. The only disturbance in this routine is the arrival of a letter from John's widow, saying that she wants to visit them and bring their grandson with her; it is this which brings George and Milly face to face with each other and with themselves, and which ultimately provides a ray – no more – of hope in their dark lives.

I'll Have You to Remember finally established Exton, to anyone who yet had doubts (or still felt that drama on television somehow didn't count) as one of the leading talents of his generation. His début as a stage dramatist in the fairly near future now seems inevitable, though what form it will take one can hardly guess. At the time of *Where I Live* he was thinking of a thoroughly non-realistic stage play – 'a sort of comical-satirical pantomime on a serious theme' – and later *I'll Have You to Remember* began life in his mind as a possible stage play. After writing it in its present form for television it continued to grow in his mind, and he took time off from his television activities to write a stage play, *The Land of My Dreams*, which, though not by any stretch of imagination the same play, does embody certain aspects of the George-Milly relationship in a completely different plot. Exton is not happy with the result and does not want it produced – not, anyway, in its present form. But the intention is there, and sooner or later it seems certain to bear fruit. Meanwhile he has returned to television with *The Big Eat*, a 'comical-satirical' piece about an eating competition in which the contestant in the lead, urged on by his family despite his evident unfitness to make a last try for the major prize, falls dead in the process, much to the chagrin of the sponsor. His wife has an answer, however: couldn't a son take his place in the finals? Clearly Exton remains as unpredictable as ever, and still has many surprises up his sleeve for us, whether on his original home ground, television, or on radio, the cinema screen, or the West End stage. And in whatever medium he chooses to work we may feel sure that the results will continue to witness the strength and independence of his talents, for 'old-fashioned' or not in his allegiances, he remains clearly one of the true originals in British drama today.

JOHN MORTIMER

LIKE CLIVE EXTON, John Mortimer sees himself as a pretty traditional sort of playwright, in whom traditional influences are at work (Dickens, Chekhov, the Russian novelists), and feels that his admiration for the plays of Pinter and Simpson, the ideas of Osborne and Wesker, does not imply any very close kinship. Many of his critics, particularly those unequivocally left of centre, have tended to agree with him, suggesting that though on a number of occasions he has been bracketed with 'new dramatists' – in revues like *One to Another*, *Pieces of Eight*, and *One Over the Eight*, and in Emlyn Williams's triple bill *Three*, where *Lunch Hour* was presented with one-acters by Pinter and Simpson – he is really an 'old dramatist' in disguise, writing 'in almost every respect typical Shaftesburiana', as a reviewer in *Encore* put it in connexion with *The Wrong Side of the Park*.

Now there is something in this: certainly *The Wrong Side of the Park* in particular is nearer the sort of play which a British dramatist would be writing now if no real challenge to the supremacy of Rattigan had been heard in the theatre than almost any other new play by a writer under forty. But even there these are important differences, and when one looks more closely at Mortimer's one-act plays it rapidly becomes clear that he is after, on a more popular level, the same sort of thing as many of his contemporaries. His subject, like theirs, is more often than not the failure of communication, the confinement to and sometimes the liberation from private dream-worlds; his approach to language is not so far from that of, say, Alun Owen, involving the use of a hypersensitive ear for the way people really talk and a cunning in selecting and heightening to produce a fully theatrical eloquence which yet carries the hall-mark of reality.

To a large extent the differences between his works and those of the other new dramatists – almost alone of them (Exton excepted) he applies his exploratory techniques to the middle classes in decline rather than the working classes ascendent – can be traced to his background, which is almost unique for a drama-

tist of this generation. Born in 1923, he was educated at Harrow and Oxford, spent the war as an assistant director and then scriptwriter with the Crown Film Unit, in 1948 qualified as a barrister and continued during the next eight years to practise at the bar while writing six novels: *Charade*, *Rumming Park*, *Answer Yes or No*, *Like Men Betrayed*, *The Narrowing Stream*, and *Three Winters*, which also exists in a radio version. It was for radio, too, that he wrote his first play, *The Dock Brief*, which won the Italia Prize and made him realize that in drama 'at last I was writing what I had wanted, all my life, to say'. Since then he has entirely given up the novel and concentrated on drama, producing nine more plays and a number of revue sketches, as well as working on the scripts of several films.

In keeping with all this, his plays take place entirely in a seedy middle-class world of run-down private schools, draughty seaside hotels, nine-to-five offices and the shabbier corners of the courts. *What Shall We Tell Caroline?* and *David and Broccoli* are both set in schools, *The Dock Brief*, *Two Stars for Comfort*, and at least one of the sketches have law in the background, and so, in a more roundabout way, does *I Spy*, though it is set in a seaside hotel; most of the rest are about office workers at work or at home in faded but 'quite nice' suburbs on the wrong side of the park. The world they present is consistent in its mixture of tragedy and comedy, the mixture being a practical expression at once of Mortimer's views on what the writer should be doing in the modern world and what the dramatist specifically should be offering audiences in the theatre.

The classic statement of Mortimer's attitude to comedy comes in the introduction to his *Three Plays*:

Comedy [is], to my mind, the only thing worth writing in this despairing age, provided the comedy is truly on the side of the lonely, the neglected, the unsuccessful, and plays its part in the war against established rules and against the imposing of an arbitrary code of behaviour upon individual and unpredictable human beings. There may, for all I know, be great and funny plays to be written about successful lawyers, brilliant criminals, wise schoolmasters, or families where children can grow up without silence and without regret. There are many plays that show that the law is always majestic or that family life

is simple and easy to endure. Speaking for myself I am not on the side of such plays and a writer of comedy must choose his side with particular care. He cannot afford to aim at the defenceless, nor can he, like the more serious writer, treat any character with contempt.

In an interview with *The Times* he has amplified this in so far as it concerns the immediate effect of his comedy on its audience :

I use comedy because it's a better weapon than frontal attack. I want to give audiences the shock of recognition in which they see actors reflecting their own behaviour and laugh at it. I want to open their hearts. Normally they come along expecting to see something funny or something serious. But, as we know, life isn't like that, and I don't force the two things apart. In any case, it makes for surprise when you don't know what to expect next. There's the interaction between reality and illusion, circumstance pulling against fantasy. It gives you that feeling of your stomach turning over.

The implications of these statements (which would, incidentally, fit very well what Chekhov is doing in his plays or, given a slightly more grotesque colouring, what Dickens or Gogol are at in their novels) might lead one to expect something more overtly on the offensive than, in fact, emerges in Mortimer's work. Indeed, Mortimer's championship of 'the lonely, the neglected, the unsuccessful' is the more telling in that it is, strictly, an elevation of them and not a degradation of 'the others' – in Mortimer's plays there are no ready-made villains on whom the blame can be put ('This man would not be lonely and unsuccessful if it were not for . . .'); instead, the seedy and downtrodden are accepted on their own terms, as human beings, mixtures inevitably of good and bad qualities, and then without glossing over or minimizing the bad qualities, Mortimer gradually unfolds the good for our inspection.

The danger in this is obvious enough: that in showing all one's characters in the best possible light one will fall imperceptibly into the sort of sentimental whimsy favoured by Frank Capra and Robert Riskin in such thirties comedies as *Mr Deeds Goes to Town*, *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, and *You Can't Take it With You*, in which each character tends to be established by some 'quaint', 'lovable' peculiarity (as though for a contemporary

comedy of humours), and a fantasy world of good intentions is hopefully substituted for the real world in which, even at its most comic, everybody does not mean well. Up to now Mortimer has managed to avoid falling into this particular trap, though he is often near enough the brink for his audience to be aware of the danger. Partly it is his taste for the grotesque (Dickens is the obvious parallel here) which saves him, and partly his precise ear for the way people really talk, which enables him, by a sort of sleight of hand if nothing else, to give his plays a certain stiffening of reality whenever they look like going too soft on him.

These qualities are evident right from his first play, *The Dock Brief* (1957), originally written for radio but later performed on television and the stage. This is an extended duologue between a simple prisoner who has disposed of his wife and the broken-down but continually hopeful barrister who has been assigned by the Court to defend him. Morgenhall, the barrister, sets rapidly about weaving an elaborate fantasy about the trial, gaily inventing surprise witnesses, rehearsing his appeals to judge, jury, and the public, while Fowle, the accused, amiably plays all the other parts and from time to time introduces, rather apologetically, a note of reality into the proceedings. ('It's a remarkable thing,' says Morgenhall on one occasion when Fowle points out to him that the surprise witness he is banking on is a figment of his own imagination, 'but with no legal training, I think you've put your finger on a fatal weakness in our defence.') In the second scene it transpires that they have lost the case, but that paradoxically Fowle is to be freed, since as Morgenhall never said a word in his defence the trial is null and void. This Fowle kindly attributes to Morgenhall's ingenuity, and they both go with enough illusions left to continue living. The play is perfectly calculated in terms of radio (so perfectly, in fact, that it seems just a tiny bit overwritten in any other medium), and despite its soft core evades sentimentality by the strength of the elements of almost Gogolian grotesquery in it. Morgenhall in particular might well have stepped straight from the pages of Gogol – his seediness and unreliability, his proliferating fantasy life and his impotence in the world of action at once proclaim his kinship with many of the characters in *Dead Souls*.

Much the same sort of imaginative background recurs in Mortimer's second play, *I Spy*, also written for radio, transferred to television and published in a revised version suitable for the stage. Here the law again figures, by implication, in the activities of the private detective Frute, as he tries to find something discreditable in the behaviour of Mrs Morgan, waitress in a sea-side hotel, to explain to her husband why she could possibly have left him. Here, too, we find in full flower a quality which is only hinted at in *The Dock Brief* (mainly in the incidental reminiscences of Fowle) – an almost Betjemanesque nostalgia for the faded, the shabby, and the anachronistic. This applies here not only to the loving depiction of life in a rather down-at-heel sea-side town during a wet summer, but also to the character of Frute, the detective, who is placed (as the lawyer his current employer sends to urge him on points out) beyond the pale by virtue of his job. ('What honourable man, I ask you, would invite a private detective to take tea with his wife or play with his children? The absurdity of the idea strikes you at once, does it not?') But then, if he is beyond the pale, so, in a sense, is Mrs Morgan, since she is, as Mortimer himself says, 'completely "good" from a moral point of view' (the only such he has ever enjoyed writing about), and even in a world of good intentions that is enough to place her apart. Inevitably, the two outcasts gravitate towards each other, and we last see them setting off together towards a future in which, the evidence provided for her husband, she can become Mrs Frute and lend a hand with the sleuthing, since after all 'another pair of eyes is often a help'.

With his third play, *What Shall We Tell Caroline?* Mortimer finally approached the theatre directly, and wrote what still remains in many ways his most completely satisfactory play. Caroline is the enigmatic daughter of Arthur and Lily London, who run Highland Close School, Coldsands, a small and dilapidated boys' prep school. It is her eighteenth birthday, but neither of her parents has noticed she is now nearly a woman. They have been too entangled in the curious emotional *ménage à trois* they share with Tony, the assistant master, who carries on a continuous but merely formal flirtation with Lily (or 'Bin' as her husband calls her).

It is the tension between the two men and Lily – Tony all little superficial attentions, Arthur deeply fond of her but able to express his love only through anger – which keeps their lives on an even keel, and when the unexpected maturing of Caroline and later her even more unexpected departure to a job in a London bank sets them questioning the relationship and trying to find some way of resolving it, disaster seems to be near, for it is only by keeping it as it is, and keeping their illusions about it, that they can preserve their *modus vivendi*. Caroline's unspeaking presence unleashes first a long speech by Lily in which she tries to explain to Caroline the dissatisfactions of her own life and do something to ensure that Caroline's will not go the same way, and then a confrontation of the two men, with Arthur finding himself insulted because Tony admits that he is not, in fact, in love with Arthur's wife. Again the solution is that put forward in *The Dock Brief*: man can stand only a very little reality, and after a short exposure to its dangerous radiations the best thing is to go back to the comfortable compromise of illusion.

It should not be taken, however, that this is necessarily Mortimer's solution to all problems; it is just the solution most suited to these characters, the only possible solution for them, in fact. In at least two of his later plays, the television play *Call Me a Liar* and his first full-length stage play *The Wrong Side of the Park*, it is the final encounter with truth, and the characters' coming to terms with the realities of the situation, which at last brings them the possibility of happiness and serenity. In the case of Sammy Noles in *Call Me a Liar* it is his habitual lying which has to be curbed; he is as incorrigible a weaver of fantasies as Morgenhall, but tries to do it in ordinary life, where most of his lies soon catch up with him. He has his reasons though; his first major lie was to pretend that the bomb which wiped out his home and family had nothing to do with him, because he did not want to be pitied, and subsequently he has gone on lying to make up for the lack of incident in his real life. The only trouble is that when something really does happen to him – he meets and falls in love with a German girl looking for work from the employment agency he works for – he nearly loses the opportunity by continuing to lie; until, that is, the girl knocks some sense

into him and persuades him that truth is better than illusion.

In *The Wrong Side of the Park* the lies are not conscious: they arise from the inability of the central character, Elaine Lee, to face the truth about her two marriages. She insists on seeing the present one as one long round of misery and boredom, and her conversation is full of elaborate reminiscences of her first marriage, which was so much fun, and her first husband, Peter, who was in every respect so much superior to Henry, her present husband. The truth of the matter, it turns out in the last act, is precisely the reverse of this: she could not bear Peter, and all the happy times she remembers and attributes to him were, in fact, part of her first acquaintance with Henry. Peter was killed in a road accident on the very night she went to bed with Henry for the first time, and ever since then she has been assuaging her feelings of guilt by systematically, albeit unconsciously, transferring in her mind every happy time she ever had with Henry to her marriage with Peter, leaving Henry, as he puts it, 'the formalities; the flowers we had to buy, the dates we had to remember; the guilt and the middle age'. But a moment of truth comes with a shock, just as before oblivion came with the shock of Peter's death; in a seance they hold to get into communication with Peter something happens to Elaine, she rushes out to revisit 'home', the home she once shared with Peter, and on the way the truth at last begins to dawn. It will be a slow process, but once the truth has been faced she and her husband can start living again.

Both plays depend rather on a last-minute revelation which explains the actions of the central character; in *Call Me a Liar* it is not really vital that we should know why Sammy lies, but in *The Wrong Side of the Park* it is important that we should understand Elaine (and incidentally Henry), and it is a pity that the revelation is so long delayed and at the same time so completely predictable right from the middle of Act I. But then, *The Wrong Side of the Park*, for all its incidental felicities of character and dialogue, is essentially a one-act play blown up to three by the introduction (very neat and craftsmanlike in itself) of a largely irrelevant sub-plot concerning the machinations of a shady but amusing lodger to get hold of the lease of the house from Henry's

crusty and eccentric old father in order to carry out some mysterious plans of his own. In these two plays, in fact, there are some signs that Mortimer's evident facility for writing speakable, lively, entertaining dialogue about almost anything is likely to get the better of him from time to time, at the expense of his plays as a whole: the character with the gift of the gab more or less highly developed (Sammy in *Call Me a Liar*, the lodger Miller in *The Wrong Side of the Park*) is obviously a sore temptation to him, since he can always be relied upon to fill up any gaps in the play with some conversational extravaganza and probably entertain the dazzled audience sufficiently in the process for them not to notice that what he is saying has little or no dramatic necessity and is really just so much makeweight. Also, the explanations, when they come, are rather baldly treated and do not seem to have any real organic connexion with the action they spring from and supposedly justify: *The Wrong Side of the Park* especially has rather the air of being chunks from a couple of characteristic, easygoing Mortimer one-acters pressed mechanically into the mould of the well-made play *à la* Pinero; such a play must have a revelation in the last act, and dutifully enough this has, but only at the expense of a lot of unnecessary and not particularly successful mystification earlier on.

Indeed, Mortimer is at his happiest when he does not have to explain directly, but can imply as much explanation as we are entitled to expect in the action of the play as it unrolls. For despite himself Mortimer seems to be at one with other dramatists of his generation in the belief that human behaviour cannot really be explained by some simple formula which makes everything clear; you cannot turn every play into a sort of whodunit – a why-did-he-do-it, perhaps – in which the clues are planted and then just before the curtain someone explains which was the one vital clue to explain a whole personality. Life is seldom if ever as clear cut as that: all sorts of explanations may fit the facts, and any or all of them may be true; motives are generally so mixed that even the protagonists in any given event do not know quite why they are acting as they are. When, as in *What Shall We Tell Caroline?* or one or two of his later plays, Mortimer is content just to show us such a situation and leave us to 'explain' it how

we will, the result is far more satisfactory than in his cut-and-dried *pièces à thèse*, since then the audience's imagination is quickened instead of deadened, and the dramatist is compelled to integrate cause (what would be explained) and effect (what is actually said and done in the present) into dialogue of a fairly uniform density, instead of letting his play disintegrate into wads of aimless, if for the instant quite entertaining, chatter among which are scattered occasional hard nodules of too clinical explanation.

Several of the later one-act plays offer good examples of this less direct technique, and so do a number of the revue sketches, such as 'Triangle' in *One to Another*, in which a waitress weaves a web of amorous fantasy around two completely unconscious regular customers; 'Night Life' in *One Over the Eight*, in which a rope manufacturer tries first to interest his companion of the evening in his work and then, frantically, to escape the subject, and 'Please Step Down' in *Second Post!*, in which a plain, arty spinster uses all the wiles at her command over the telephone to lure down the man from upstairs. In these, obviously, the discipline of extreme brevity precludes explanation. The situations have to carry such explanation as they need as graphically and succinctly as possible – and the same applies slightly less forcibly in the one-acters for stage and television. In *Lunch Hour*, for example, we have what is in effect an extended sketch about a couple, a fairly respectable business-man and an office-girl, trying to find somewhere where they can make love in the lunch hour. He is not very expert, chooses a respectable boarding-house near a station and spins the landlady a story about having to talk something over quietly with his wife. But the secretary, being a simple unimaginative soul, begins to act as if what he has said is true, wants to know what was the business which was so urgent she should be summoned down from Scarborough to discuss it, and wonder if she ought to have anything to do with a man who can behave so heartlessly towards his (imaginary) loved ones. The joke is prolonged and elaborated much too far, but at least the characters are permitted simply to reveal themselves in what they say and do and the explanation ('Telling the truth is often a great concealment; we are given away by what we pretend to be') is kept for the preface to the published text.

In *The Encyclopaedist*, Mortimer's contribution to the B.B.C. Television series *They Met in a City*, the method is similar: an encyclopaedia salesman has three encounters with the same woman and sees three faces of her in three successive phases of her marriage, phases in which the question of knowledgeability plays an important part, hence the relevance of his encyclopaedias. And in *Collect Your Hand Baggage* we have another comedy of misunderstanding when Crispin, the forties bohemian surviving bravely into the sixties, decides to bestow himself as a favour on the daughter of his landlady, plain and therefore, he believes, loveless, only to find that she does not want him, has hardly noticed him, and is about to go off to Paris with someone else altogether. (This is an odd and none-too-well-balanced piece, since the role of the young people who accompany Crispin is never made clear, though they seem to have more significance than the sort of collective straight-man to him they are here required to be; Mortimer tells us in his introduction that 'It was written with another, larger play in mind; a play in which the youthful characters would play a bigger and more destructive part and the central character more fully represent, than Crispin, the errors of experience'. This is, in fact, a description of his new full-length play, *Two Stars for Comfort*, in which, apparently, he set out to make things rather clearer.)

But arguably the most successful of all the later plays is Mortimer's second foray into the world of school, *David and Broccoli*, written originally for B.B.C. Television. Here the scene alternates between two of Mortimer's pet stalking-grounds, the old-fashioned, slightly disreputable private school in North London and a faded residential hotel cluttered with potted plants and tea-room wickerwork. The story is that of a timid, unathletic boy's fear of and animosity towards 'Broccoli' Smith, the rough, powerful but slow-witted P.T. coach. He has his chance to get even with Broccoli when he discovers Broccoli's weakness – a passion for the elementary occultism of Everyman's Almanac of future events – and exploits it to such effect that he convinces Broccoli that the end of the world is due the very next Thursday, the day of the prize-giving, and thereby brings about a scene as a result of which Broccoli leaves under a cloud, with no other job

open to him. Though the central premise of the plot is rather far-fetched, the play scores by the precision with which the backgrounds are evoked and the unsentimental reality of the boys, particularly David, who is a fascinatingly accurate amalgam of overdeveloped intellect and underdeveloped understanding: in his terror he sees no farther than the immediate object of his terror, and sees it as something to be disposed of at all costs. But even when Broccoli is routed and thoroughly cut down to size he feels, apparently, no particular compunction about having removed the one security in his victim's pathetic life: he is a child, yet he has vanquished a man, and that is enough. About children at least Mortimer has no illusions, and the end product, though evidently more fantastically than *What Shall We Tell Caroline?* is as far away as that minor masterpiece from the sentimentality which seems always to go with a taste, such as Mortimer's, for the picturesquely grotesque.

As much can hardly be said for *Two Stars for Comfort*, Mortimer's second full-length play, though it does in some respects show an advance on *The Wrong Side of the Park*: it is concentrated fairly and squarely on one character and the events which lead up to his belated moment of truth, and it resists the temptation to tie everything up too neatly with a cut-and-dried explanation of him and his way of life in the last five minutes. But these improvements are counterbalanced by the recurrence in exaggerated form of other faults from Mortimer's earlier work, notably the shameless reduction of minor characters (and even some major characters) to comedy-of-humours stereotypes, each tirelessly parroting variations on his or her *idée fixe*, and the tendency to play what is basically a rather slight and sentimental plot anecdote for considerably more than it is worth.

The story this time is a sort of minor-key reworking of the *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* formula. For some years now Sam Turner has been running the Riverside Hotel on the banks of the Thames, happily regardless of bills and hard times and looking forward each year to regatta week, when his wife goes away to relatives at Ruislip, the lively young people come to stay, and he is called in to crown the Regatta Queen (with all the incidental advantages the job can be made to carry). This year things are

different, however: when his wife leaves for Ruislip she really means it, and sets about obtaining a legal separation; business is going downhill and the arrangements of the regatta are handed over instead to his despised rival at the Station Hotel; the young people are not so carefree as they used to be; and this time, when he gets involved with one of them he finds himself taking it seriously and trying to hold on to her. In fact, he is getting old. Having given up the law in a moment of revelation and set out to keep a pub 'dedicated to the principle that man is born free and is everywhere not enjoying it', he has had his run of happiness, his succession of wonderful moments. But living in a sentimental dream-world of his own creation, telling people only what they want to hear (each of his regulars has a craving for comfort in constant need of satisfaction), and listening in return only to what he wants to hear, he has been brushing aside reality long enough, and now it is beginning to catch up with him. He is, as his latest Regatta Queen realizes, a hollow man who has gradually degenerated from being the master of his world to being its slave; he is worn out with feeding other people fantasies and incapable of speaking the truth for fear that someone should be upset – until, that is, she chooses to leave his comfortable but insecurely founded world of illusion for the cold world outside, and in consequence he decides as the curtain falls that it is time some changes were made.

The most obvious miscalculation in the play is Mortimer's apparent mistaking of this story, eminently suitable as it would be for one of his more insubstantial one-act *comédies larmoyantes*, for the real stuff of tragedy. Neither of the principal characters develops, they just change: Sam right at the end, when like his namesake in *Call Me a Liar* he is persuaded by the action of the girl he is involved with to forsake illusion and embrace reality; Ann, the girl, twice, first of all when she (predictably) succumbs to Sam's advances and the charms of a twirl of the drum-sticks, and then at the end when an unkind burlesque of her relationship with Sam staged by the other young people snaps her back, rather less explicably, to the realities of the situation. But the progression of their affair and the effect it has on them both is made the central theme of the play, a position it is far too weak to sustain.

To support it Mortimer has in effect devised two contrasting choruses: the quartet of young people from *Collect Your Hand Baggage*, who represent presumably iconoclastic youth and vitality (though they appear rather softened and the 'bigger and more destructive part' they were intended to play is confined to their cathartic regatta-night entertainment), and the matching quartet of old regulars (the woman whose one subject of conversation is her vanished husband; the schoolmaster obsessed with local history, and so on). For the most part, in fact, these other characters are present just to fill in any gaps in the action with amusing and characterful conversation – which they do quite efficiently, though by this stage in Mortimer's work the device is becoming rather too mechanical for comfort, an over-glib way of inflating a slight inspiration to superficially imposing proportions.

Mortimer remains in many ways an unknown quantity among the new dramatists, if only because he appears too completely knowable. There is no noticeable development between *The Dock Brief* and *Two Stars for Comfort*: each successive work has shown the general expertise, the amazing skill and facility with dialogue, and the thorough practical grasp of the medium for which it was originally intended which marked the first play of all, and the most we can proffer, tentatively, by way of a subsequent discovery is that the full-length play may not be his *forte* and that he should eschew the temptation to point his moral too plainly. Mortimer's world is consistent and instantly recognizable, and he knows his way round it with complete certainty: the question now is will he find it in subsequent works the trap it looks now like becoming, or see it rather as a launching-pad to the discovery of fresh worlds elsewhere? His most recent work does not begin to provide the answer.

PETER SHAFFER

WHEREAS WITH PRACTICALLY ALL the other dramatists considered in the body of this book it is the personal quality as much as anything in their writing which fascinates, the feeling it gives one of being allowed glimpses of a private world – more or less like our own, more or less recognizable in terms of the reality we see about us, depending on the writer – with Peter Shaffer the most interesting quality of his work is its impersonality. His work has all the classic qualities of the traditional dramatist – cast-iron construction, a coherent and well-plotted story to tell, solid, realistic characterization, extreme fluency in the composition of lively, speakable, exactly placed dialogue – but ultimately he emerges in it as mysterious and impalpable as Walter, the central character of *Five Finger Exercise*, who, if he is the hero, must be one of the most chilly and enigmatic heroes on record.

Shaffer fits in this section, evidently, more by accident than by design; if ever there was a dramatist whose works were meant for the stage it is he. But the fact remains that after a long apprenticeship spent writing and tearing up plays in the intervals of working in a New York library and a London music publishers (Shaffer was born in London in 1926, took a degree at Cambridge and started play-writing almost immediately upon coming down) he had his first two productions on television before achieving a major West End success with *Five Finger Exercise*. And to be honest, it is unlikely that anyone would have predicted great things for him on the strength of these first two plays; the earlier, *Balance of Terror*, was a thriller about spies and counter-spies tussling over an intercontinental ballistic missile, cunningly put together along conventional lines but nothing very out of the ordinary, and the later, *The Salt Lands*, was a patchily worked out though serious and well-constructed attempt to present a classical tragedy situation in terms of modern Israel.

All the more surprising, then, that his first performed stage play, *Five Finger Exercise*, should be so outstandingly successful on every level. For one thing, in it Shaffer invades that most

dangerous of all territories for an English dramatist, the prosperous upper-middle-class drawing-room of a house in the Home Counties. Not only that, but his play is put together with the theatrical aplomb of a Pinero, well provided with dialogue of remarkable crispness and articulacy, and technically very much part of the mainstream tradition of British drama; it would have been written in much the same way (though perhaps it would not have found such ready backing) if John Osborne and the rest had never lived.

What is it doing, then, in a book about new drama? Not every writer under forty is a 'new dramatist' and not every first play produced since 1956 has a necessary claim to admittance, after all. Well, it claims our attention not only for its traditional virtues, which are considerable, but because if we look at it more closely it turns out to be an unusually skilful and unexpected foray of new ideas and new perceptions into the fustiest stronghold of convention; having convinced the old-fashioned West End playgoer that it is 'all right' – not sordidly concerned with the kitchen sink, and certainly not in any way experimental, but just an ordinary play about people like you and me – it proceeds bit by bit to strip its characters and their way of life bare with as much ruthlessness as Ionesco sets about rather the same business in *The Bald Prima Donna*. Only here the weapon is psychological penetration: Shaffer takes the typical Dodie Smith-Esther McCracken family – fussy, scatterbrained mother, stolid, inarticulate father, bossy tomboy daughter, arty varsity-bound son – and instead of accepting them as the self-evident, indisputable *données* upon which a light comedy or drama can be based, he asks us to look at them, consider why they are as they are, and what would happen if suddenly something unexpected, from outside their normal experience, should intrude on the settled picture of complacent mediocrity.

The intruder in this instance is Walter, a strange, charming, mysteriously reserved young German tutor who acts as a catalyst for all sorts of violent and unexpected emotional reactions. Each member of the household sees him as a potential ally or lover: the mother dreams perhaps of a discreet affair with him or more probably of amorous proposals flatteringly pressed upon her and

skilfully parried; the father finds he can talk to him in a way which is unthinkable with his own son; the level-headed daughter finds his lack of involvement disconcerting, and the son discovers in him at last the congenial companion he has been seeking (his mother in a bout of bitter fury at the end, when Walter has revealed that his feelings for her are infuriatingly filial, suggests that Clive's feelings for him are tinged with homosexuality, but there seems no real reason for us to believe her).

The originality of the observation, all the more potent for being disguised beneath an apparently conventional surface, is paralleled by the veiled originality of the form of expression used. Taken line by line there is nothing at all surprising or upsetting about Shaffer's style: it is just the usual pruned, heightened realism of traditional stage parlance. But if we look at the play as a whole it at once becomes apparent that the action does not progress, as one would expect, by way of conversations leading purposefully towards clear stages in the dramatic argument; instead, the play organizes itself into a series of splendid self-revealing tirades, usually directed at the passive, uninvolved head of Walter, who remains so mysterious (necessarily to his function in the play) precisely because he alone of the characters is not permitted to reveal himself in this way – the other characters reveal themselves to him just because he does not react sufficiently to spoil the imaginary pictures of him they are building up in their minds or step outside the role each has assigned him in his or her personal drama.

Five Finger Exercise is immensely clever, extremely well written, and completely theatrical in the best possible sense of the term; it is one of the most finished plays we have seen in the last five years. It is also quite impersonal, almost as though the author has felt it his duty to keep himself entirely out of the picture. This is not necessarily a bad thing – most authors err in the other direction, by not detaching themselves sufficiently from the object of their labours – but it is disconcerting. It is anyone's guess what sort of play Shaffer will write next, though one might have hazarded a guess even before its subject was announced (it will be called *The Royal Hunt for the Sun*, require considerable resources for its staging, and concern that most

enigmatic of all civilizations for the European, the Inca empire of pre-Colombian America) that he would go out of his way not to repeat himself. Meanwhile he has completed a film script, a free adaptation of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (not, apparently, that finally used in the filming); what he will do next remains shrouded in mystery, possibly even to him.

A Room and Some Views

‘But what would you say your plays were
about, Mr Pinter?’

‘The weasel under the cocktail cabinet.’

– *exchange at a new writers’ brains trust*

Harold Pinter

THE ASSIGNMENT OF WRITERS to various sections of this book has been at best a rather arbitrary business: though they have usually belonged unmistakably to one section rather than another, there are very few who fit completely into the place allotted to them, without overlapping. But with Harold Pinter the system just breaks down. He began by writing stage plays, got his first hearing on radio, had his first full-length stage play put on in the ordinary commercial theatre, achieved his first popular success on television and in revue, and finally achieved a big theatrical success without having recourse to the English Stage Company (though they briefly housed a transfer of a double bill by him), Theatre Workshop or any enterprising provincial company. Where should he be placed? The only answer is by himself, a position to which his unique eminence among the writers we have been considering would in any case surely entitle him.

Harold Pinter, like several of the other writers we have encountered, is an East End Jew (he was born in 1930) and also, like two or three others, he was for some time a professional actor, under the name of David Baron. He still acts from time to time; he played a minor role in *A Night Out* on television, was seen as Goldberg in a revival of *The Birthday Party* at Cheltenham, and took over the part of Mick in *The Caretaker* for a while during its London run. But since he began writing plays in 1957 his time has become more and more occupied with writing, and the results are to be seen in, to date, two full-length stage plays, two one-act plays, three television plays, two radio plays, seven revue sketches, and one film script (not to mention adaptations from stage to television, radio to stage, etc.).

Though he began writing while acting, his earliest works were not plays at all. He records that he saw very few plays before he was twenty and then during the next nine years played Ireland in one-night stands (for eighteen months) and in repertory all over. All this time he was writing hundreds of poems,

short prose pieces, often in monologue or dialogue form, and a semi-autobiographical novel, *The Dwarfs*, from which some material was drawn later for the radio play of the same name. His first play was a one-acter, *The Room*, written early in 1957, and he subsequently described how he came to write it thus: 'I went into a room one day and saw a couple of people in it. This stuck with me for some time afterwards, and I felt the only way I could give it expression and get it off my mind was dramatically. I started off with this picture of two people and let them carry on from there. It wasn't a deliberate switch from one kind of writing to another. It was quite a natural movement.'

What happens when they carry on from there is very strange indeed. The two people are husband and wife, Mr and Mrs Hudd, and the play starts with a long monologue by the wife from which we gather that the husband is a truck-driver and is about to take his truck out on the icy roads. This is interrupted by the arrival of the landlord, who seems to live in the house and talks about his mother, who may or may not have been Jewish, and his sister. After he and the husband leave another married couple, the Sands, arrive in search of a room and say they were told by someone in the basement that this room is vacant. After they have gone the landlord returns, saying that the man in the basement has been plaguing him all week-end to tell Mrs Hudd he wants to see her as soon as her husband has gone out, and after some argument she agrees. When he arrives he turns out to be a blind Negro, who apparently knows her, in spite of her denials, and begs her to come home with him. Mr Hudd returns, talks casually about his trip, then knocks the Negro down and beats him savagely. Mrs Hudd is struck blind as the curtain falls.

Even from this account it should be evident that the play is not what one would normally expect from the first work of a new dramatist (particularly, perhaps, an actor turned dramatist). It is not autobiographical, as are many first works, nor, clearly, is it imitative of any model, popular or esoteric. In performance it has an obsessive, dreamlike quality which forbids any questioning on the exact significance of what is happening before our eyes, but even if on reflection we begin to wonder what it all means we soon find that Pinter has covered his tracks pretty

effectively. Often this is done in matters of detail: many statements, unimportant enough in themselves and acceptable without question, are suddenly brought to prominence by having doubt thrown at them by another character. After Mr Kidd, the landlord, has been talking at random about his mother and sister, Mrs Hudd says, quite matter-of-factly: 'I don't believe he had a sister, ever.' When the Sands arrive they are looking for the landlord, but firmly deny his name is Kidd – could there, possibly, be two landlords? And why should they be convinced that this room is vacant when we can see perfectly well that it is occupied? Are they going up or coming down? Have the Hudds been living there for some time, as is first implied, or just moved in, as Mrs Hudd says later? Does Mrs Hudd know Riley, the blind negro, or not? Is he perhaps, as some have thought, her father?

The technique of casting doubt upon everything by matching each apparently clear and unequivocal statement with an equally clear and unequivocal statement of its contrary – used rather crudely in some parts of this play, as when Rose Hudd actually 'comments on the discrepancy between the Sands' initial statement that they were on their way up and their later statement that they were on their way down when they called on her – is one which we shall find used constantly in Pinter's plays to create an air of mystery and uncertainty. The situations involved are always very simple and basic, the language which the characters use is an almost uncannily accurate reproduction of everyday speech (indeed, in this respect Pinter, far from being the least realistic dramatist of his generation, is arguably the most realistic), and yet in these ordinary surroundings lurk mysterious terrors and uncertainties – and by extension, the whole external world of everyday realities is thrown into question. Can we ever know the truth about anybody or anything? Is there any absolute truth to be known?

However, this is to anticipate. In *The Room* the hand is not yet entirely sure and the mystifications are often too calculated, too heavily underlined. The suppression of motives, for example, which in later plays comes to seem inevitable, because no one, not even the man who acts, can know precisely what impels him

to act, here often looks merely an arbitrary device: it is not that the motives are unknowable, but simply that the author will not permit *us* to know them. So, too, the melodramatic finale with its trappings of blindness and violent death (the blind negro is so like a parody of a Prévert embodiment of fate that one wonders how familiar Pinter can have been with the French cinema of the forties) appears in retrospect particularly out of place, since it makes the terrors which beset Rose all too actual and immediate. For essentially Rose, the Rose of the earlier scenes anyway, belongs to that group of characteristic Pinter figures from his first phase (that in which he wrote 'comedies of menace'), those who simply fear the world outside. The plays of this group – *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party*, and *A Slight Ache* – all take place in confined surroundings, in one room in fact, which represents for their protagonists at least a temporary refuge from the others (it is tempting, but not really necessary, to see it in terms of Freudian symbolism as a womb-substitute), something they have shored up against their ruins. The menace comes from outside, from the intruder whose arrival unsettles the warm, comfortable world bounded by four walls, and any intrusion can be menacing, because the element of uncertainty and unpredictability the intruder brings with him is in itself menacing. And the menace is effective almost in inverse proportion to its degree of particularization, the extent to which it involves overt physical violence or direct threats. We can all fear an unexpected knock at the door, a summons away from our safe, known world of normal domesticities on unspecified business (it is surely not entirely without significance that Pinter, himself a Jew, grew up during the war, precisely the time when the menace inherent in such a situation would have been, through the medium of the cinema or of radio, most imaginatively present to any child, and particularly perhaps a Jewish child). But the more particularized the threat is, the less it is likely to apply to our own case and the less we are able to read our own semi-conscious fears into it.

This lesson is learnt in Pinter's first full-length play, *The Birthday Party*, which followed almost immediately upon *The Room*. Here the room is precisely situated: it is in a run-down

boarding-house in a seaside town, inhabited by a mild, self-indulgent man called Stanley, who seems once to have been a pianist and is now content to do nothing and be pampered by Meg, his stupid, doting, suffocatingly motherly landlady, who clearly gets on his nerves, but is equally clearly useful to him. This shabby idyll is interrupted by the arrival of two men, supposedly looking for rooms, a sinister, withdrawn Irishman named McCann, and a talkative, amiable Jew called Goldberg. They have obviously come for Stanley, for what reason we cannot guess, and they seem to be hired killers of some sort. Playing on his fears in the second act they put him through a gruelling cross-examination, throwing at him endless accusations which never add up to anything the audience can grasp as a single comprehensible charge against him, and then proceed to a sort of ritual humiliation of him at his birthday party, at the end of which he is carried off in a state of hysterical collapse. When we see him next morning he is spruce and respectable in striped trousers, black jacket and white collar, carrying a bowler hat. As he is taken by McCann and Goldberg to the waiting car he says nothing.

Clearly, the element of external violence has not altogether disappeared, but the heavy (if cloudy) symbolism of *The Room* has vanished, and instead we get a real comedy of menace which is funny and menacing primarily in relation to the unrelieved ordinariness of its background. The very fact that Stanley, Meg, and her husband Peter are believable figures living in a believable real world intensifies the horror of Stanley's situation when the intruders come to break into his comfortable humdrum life and take him away. But, it might be said, the arrival of McCann and Goldberg takes it out of the real everyday reality: whatever we may have done in our lives, it is unlikely to be anything so terrible and extraordinary that two professional killers would be hired to deal with us. The answer to that is that this might well be so if Stanley's offence were ever named, or the source of his punishment explained. But this is not the case: the menace of McCann and Goldberg is exactly the nameless menace with which Stanley cruelly teases Meg before they arrive – the two men with a wheelbarrow in the back of their van who are looking

for *a certain person*. . . . Just as she can be terrified by this nameless threat of retribution for unknown crimes, so we can be terrified when the same fate actually overtakes Stanley. With his habitual dexterity in such matters Pinter manages to rig the scene of Stanley's breakdown in such a way that we never know what the guilt to which he finally succumbs may be: every conceivable accusation is thrown at him, one way and another, McCann, in accord with his Irishness and brooding ferocity, seeming mainly concerned with politics and religion, treachery to 'the organization' and matters of heresy, while Goldberg, clearly a travelling salesman by natural disposition, is more interested in sex and property (Stanley murdered his wife, ran out on his fiancée and so on). Something for everyone, in fact: somewhere, the author seems to be telling his audience, you have done something – think hard and you may remember what it is – which will one day catch you out. The next time you answer a door to an innocent-looking stranger. . . .

The ambiguity, then, not only creates an unnerving atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty, but also helps to generalize and universalize the fears and tensions to which Pinter's characters are subject. The more doubt there is about the exact nature of the menace, the exact provocation which has brought it into being, the less chance there is of anyone in the audience feeling that anyway it could not happen to him. The kinship with Kafka, particularly *The Trial*, is obvious: we do not know what K. is accused of any more than we know what Stanley is accused of, and we do not know who has sent Goldberg and McCann to carry out sentence (if there is a judge and a sentence) any more than we know who sent the two men in black one day to slit K.'s throat. Not only that, but the farther we explore this world the farther we seem to be from an answer. However far K. inquires into his mysterious judiciary, there are always further, higher levels to be explored, and in the same way Pinter has not omitted to provide a footnote to *The Birthday Party* in a one-act play he wrote immediately afterwards, *The Dumb Waiter*. In *The Birthday Party* the hired killers (if they are hired killers) appear as all-powerful and inscrutable: where Stanley is the menaced, they are menace personified, invulnerable beings, one might suppose,

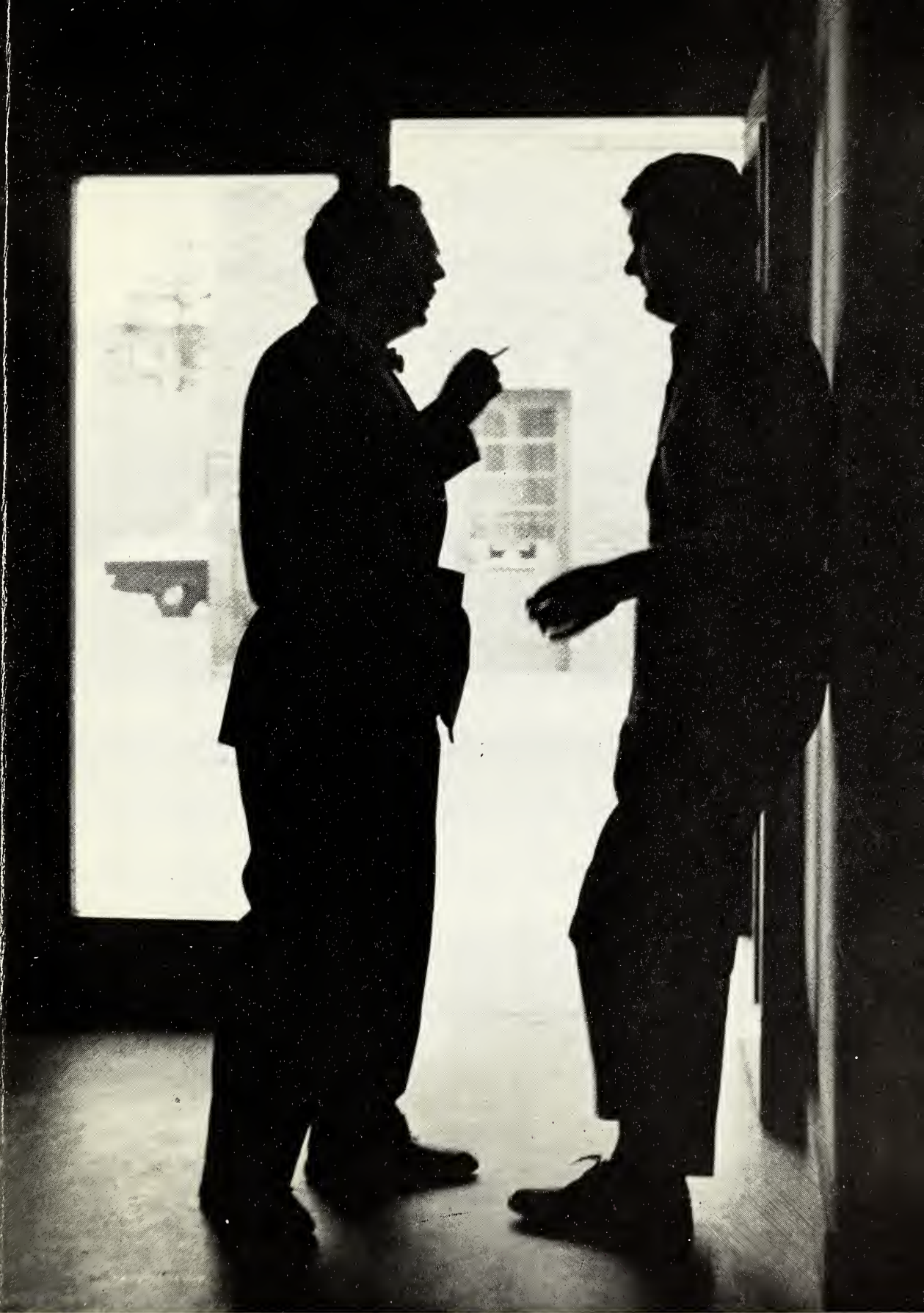
from another world, emissaries of death. But no, *The Dumb Waiter* assures us, hired killers are just men like anyone else; they only obey orders, and while menacing others they themselves can also be menaced.

The Dumb Waiter, even more than *The Birthday Party*, is properly a 'comedy of menace': whereas *The Birthday Party* is really funny only in the opening scenes, with their obsessive repetitions and misunderstanding, *The Dumb Waiter* is consistently funny almost all through (though a friend who saw its first production, in German at the Frankfurt Municipal Theatre, assures me that then it was played as a completely serious horror piece without a flicker of amusement). It concerns two men passing a dull Friday morning in their basement bedroom, reading the papers, talking about football, discussing the grammatical propriety of saying 'light the gas' rather than 'light the kettle'. Little by little it emerges that they are hired killers in Birmingham on a job and waiting for their final instructions; then the 'dumb waiter' at the back (this basement must have been a restaurant kitchen once) begins to work. An order comes down: 'Two braised steak and chips. Two sago puddings. Two teas without sugar.' Eagerly they try to do what it says, sending up whatever they have to offer, while the demands of whoever is at the other end of the contraption get wilder and wilder: Macaronni Pasticcio; Ormitha Macaronnada; One Bamboo Shoots, Water Chestnuts and Chicken; One Char Sin and Bean Sprouts. Finally they have nothing left, and go over the instructions they have already been given again; Gus goes out to the lavatory and while he is gone Ben receives an order over the speaking-tube which turns out to be that he must kill Gus. They confront each other as the curtain slowly falls.

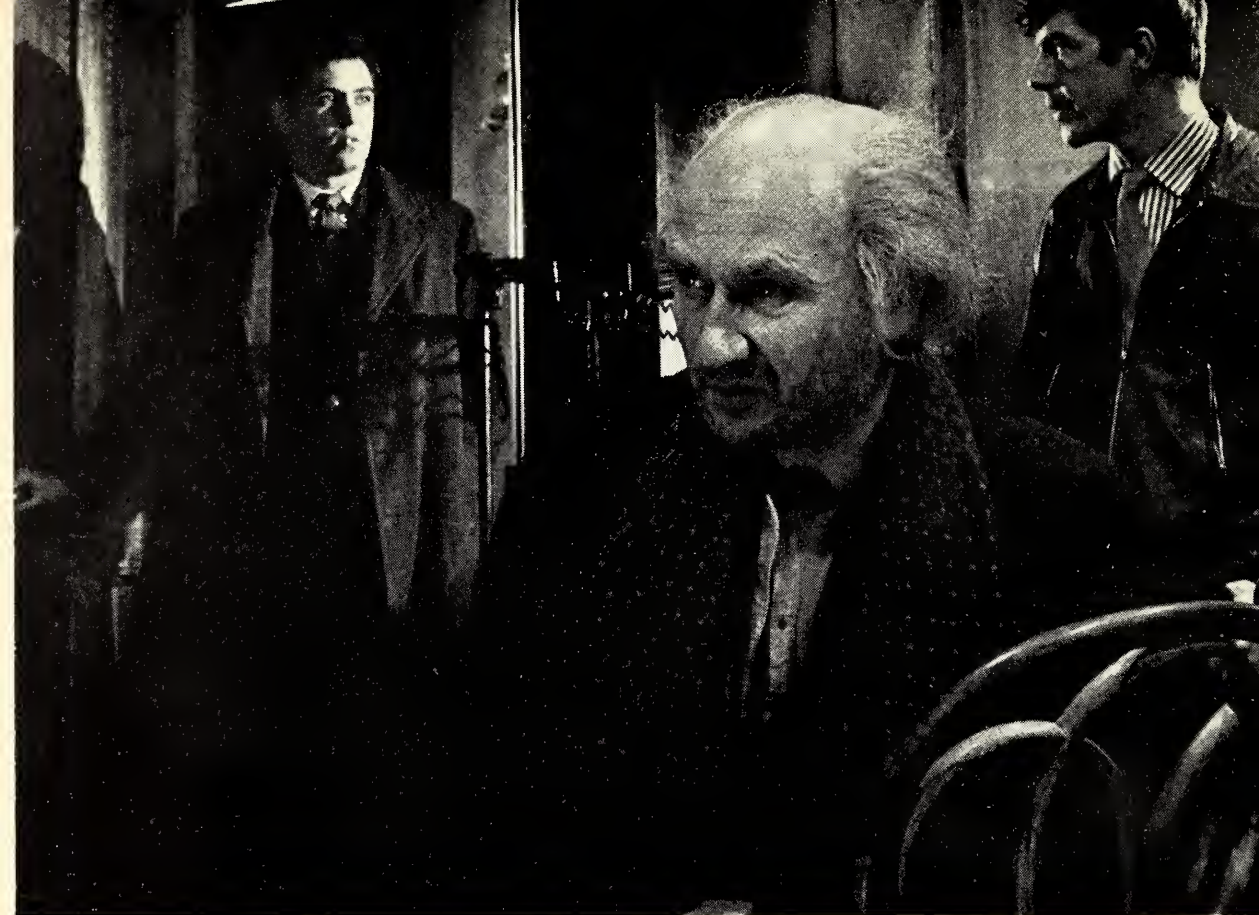
Here the elements of the situation in *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* are repeated in a different guise; the room, the inhabitants at their ease inside it, and the disembodied threat of intrusion, in this case the intrusion of the unseen order-giver at the end of the dumb waiter. The fact that the people being menaced here are precisely those whose business it is usually to menace others, hired killers, offers an extra twist of irony, but does not make any essential difference to their situation. It does,

however, reflect back on our previous knowledge of Pinter's world, not only, as already mentioned, by raising doubts in our minds as to the possibility of ever meeting our judges face to face (if McCann might be ordered to kill Goldberg, or vice versa, who is to say that someone, somewhere might not order the destruction of the man who ordered their destruction? – is he not in all probability, like them, just an instrument?), but also by casting doubts on the safety and integrity of the room itself. Without any physical intrusion whatever, the menace may be lurking already inside the room, ready to strike through the disunion of its inhabitants – or, to put it another way, the threat may not come only from outside; it is no good simply keeping our minds closed to outside influence, for even inside there the seeds of destruction may already be planted.

This implication is worked out fully in the last of this group of plays, *A Slight Ache*, originally written for the radio and later given a rather inept West End production. Here for the first time the room has a window and people look out; here for the first time the menace is invited in and plays a completely passive role – he is not so much a menace in himself as the tool of the room's inhabitants against each other. The two in the room are a husband and wife, and the outsider a match-seller on the deserted country road outside their house. He has been there for two or three months, but what is he doing? He never sells any matches, and never seems to go away; he is there last thing at night and first thing in the morning. He worries Edward and Flora, and Edward insists on inviting him in; once in, he serves as an object in relation to which they act out their own insecurities and dissatisfactions. For Edward he is an impostor; he may be someone returned from the past; he is cunning, he is after something which he will get if Edward makes one false move (he is, perhaps, the personification of all the personal inadequacies Edward feels in himself?). For Flora he is the husband she has wanted, the pet she can fuss over, the child she can mother. And so gradually Edward breaks himself down, faced with this monumentally non-committal figure (a later Pinter short story, *The Examination*, provides a useful gloss here, treating of almost exactly the same mental process from the inside), and Flora



12. Sydney Newman and Alun Owen during rehearsals
of 'The Rose Affair'



13a. 'The Caretaker': b. 'I'll have you to Remember'



gathers strength from his presence, until finally Edward and the match-seller change positions, Flora herself hanging the match-seller's tray around Edward's neck before she takes the new object of her devotion out for lunch in the garden, by the pool.

A Slight Ache brings us to the threshold of a new phase in Pinter's career, introducing a number of changes both internal and external. For one thing, it marks the end of a period of relative obscurity. Up to mid-1959 his plays had made very little impact on the public at large. *The Room* was first produced by Bristol University Department of Drama and later by Bristol Old Vic Drama School for the *Sunday Times* Drama Festival; *The Birthday Party* ran a bare week at the Lyric, Hammersmith, to almost total critical incomprehension; *The Dumb Waiter* was produced first in German at Frankfurt; and *A Slight Ache* was commissioned for the Third Programme. Pinter was a name to conjure with, just about, for some intellectual theatre-goers, but that was all.

A Slight Ache also marks the end of the 'comedy of menace' phase in Pinter's work, though ironically just when he was moving out of it the phrase was coined and has become almost unavoidable in discussion of Pinter, though generally applied to work which does nothing to merit the title. For these early plays, however, the description is admirably exact. Menace is unmistakably present: the central characters – Rose, Stanley, Gus and Ben, Edward – are all prey to unknown dangers, unspoken threats, and finally an unpleasant fate (all the more sinister for remaining undefined) overtakes them all. But comedy is present, too, usually in the earlier scenes, but nearly all through in *The Dumb Waiter*. Evidently, on one level at least, Pinter has learnt a lot from the master of controlled horror, Hitchcock, many of whose bravura effects are achieved in precisely this way, from making some horrible reality emerge out of a piece of light and apparently irrelevant comedy. But Pinter's comedy rarely even seems irrelevant: it is 'about' the same things as his scenes of terror, the inability, or he has implied, the unwillingness of human beings to communicate, to make contact with each other. If it is terrifying to open the door to a strange knock, it is equally terrifying to open your mind to someone else, for once he is in you never

know what he may do (Edward's trouble, for instance, is almost entirely that he talks too much, that, to parody a phrase of Arthur Miller, he allows himself to be wholly known). Consequently, in ordinary conversation Pinter's characters twist and turn, profoundly distrustful of any direct communication, and even when they attempt it are generally constitutionally incapable of achieving it: hardly ever in his work does one encounter two people of the same level of intelligence in conversation – there is nearly always one leaping ahead in the exchange while another stumbles confusedly along behind – except at the lowest end of the scale, where both are so stupid that communication is virtually impossible anyway. And out of these confusions and conversational impasses Pinter creates his characteristic forms of comedy, which may be examined at its purest in some of the revue sketches which were his next work after *A Slight Ache* and which constitute his first unmistakable success with a wider public.

These sketches are, of course, very slight and of quite minor importance in Pinter's work, but unlike many 'popular' works of 'serious' writers they contain no hint of writing down and most of them are completely characteristic of their author. They came about more or less by accident; Disley Jones, who had worked on *The Birthday Party*, found himself involved in planning a new revue, *One to Another*, and asked Pinter if he would care to contribute. Pinter thought about it and then turned one of his early monologues into a dialogue, 'The Black and White', which he followed with 'Trouble in the Works' for the same show, 'Special Offer', 'Getting Acquainted', 'Last to Go', and 'Request Stop' for *Pieces of Eight*, an even more popular revue, and a seventh 'Applicant', which first appeared in his volume *A Slight Ache and other plays*.

The sketches vary in their form of humour: 'Special Offer', which concerns a B.B.C. lady disturbed by an offer of 'Men for Sale' in Swan & Edgars, and 'Getting Acquainted', a farcical episode built around a Civil Defence practice, are slight pieces which Pinter himself does not wish to preserve. 'Trouble in the Works' and 'Applicant' are both interview scenes: in the first a factory manager receives the complaints of the workmen's repre-

sentative about some of the products they have taken a dislike to (such as the high speed taper shank spiral flute reamers and the fundamental side outlet relief with handwheel); in the second an unfortunate applicant for a job is fitted with electrodes and bombarded with impossible questions until he suffers a complete collapse. 'Applicant' takes us back to 'comedy of menace' country, being in effect a variation on the interrogation scene in *The Birthday Party*; 'Trouble in the Works' is primarily a linguistic fantasy on themes taken from the terminology of heavy engineering. Neither is typical Pinter, though neither could be written by anyone else. But the other three sketches show to perfection his way with dialogue and also a new relaxation and warmth in handling human beings which suggests more than anything which has gone before the way he will develop.

They are, in fact, as the author himself has remarked, plays in miniature. Of 'The Black and White' he explained: 'I had never done anything with the tramp women because they fitted naturally into a complete play which just happened to be four minutes long: it couldn't be expanded or worked into a more general framework, but on the other hand what can you do with a one-act play which lasts only four minutes? The only thing, of course, though I would never have considered it a possibility unprompted, is to fit it into a revue as a sketch.'

But if they are plays in miniature, they are plays with many differences from what has gone before. There is no menace, no battle between the light and warmth of the room and the invading forces of darkness and disruption from outside. Instead we have two old tramp women in an all-night café comparing notes on the way they spend their nights, watching the last night buses go past; a newspaper-seller and the proprietor of a coffee-stall talking about which evening paper is the last to be sold; a slightly mad woman making a scene at a bus stop by maintaining loudly that a very mild-looking man next to her has made an improper proposal. They are just tiny cameos in which two or more characters are put into relation with each other and allowed simply to interact; they are all, in a sense, about failures of communication, or more properly perhaps the unwillingness to communicate (the two tramp women do perhaps communicate

at a very low level, but the woman at the bus stop is completely solitary and neither the newsvendor nor the man at the coffee-stall ever really understands a word the other is saying). Pinter himself stresses the unwillingness: he has been quoted as saying, 'I feel that instead of any inability to communicate there is a deliberate evasion of communication. Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that there is continual cross-talk, a continual talking about other things rather than what is at the root of their relationship.'

This much is true (in varying degrees) of all his work, right through from *The Room* to *The Collection*, and describes one aspect of his dramatic writing very well. But from these latter three sketches on, the emphasis in his work comes to be placed much more squarely on the relationships between characters, their attempts to live together without giving up too much of themselves. (It might be remarked, parenthetically, that if no character really wants to communicate with the others in Pinter's plays he nearly always wants the other to communicate with him, and much of the tension in the dialogue comes from the constant evasions, the slight revelations and drawings back involved in this endless skirmishing on the threshold of communication, with each character determined to find out more than he tells.) The same shift of emphasis is suggested by something Pinter said just after writing the sketches: 'As far as I am concerned there is no real difference between my sketches and my plays. In both I am interested primarily in people: I want to present living people to the audience, worthy of their interest primarily because they *are*, they exist, not because of any moral the author may draw from them.' For though the earlier plays are certainly not tied to a moral of any sort, they are slightly impeded in the presentation of people just being, existing, by the exigencies of plot, which require them to be menaced and to succumb. But the statement, only partially true of Pinter's plays up to *A Slight Ache*, becomes completely true in the best of the sketches ('The Black and White' and 'Last to Go') and in the plays which followed them, *A Night Out* and *The Caretaker*, where the characters, the one mysterious external menace removed, can get on with precisely the job this statement envisages for them: just existing.

It is, in fact, tempting to see Pinter's progression from the earlier plays to the later in terms of a closer and closer approach to realism. In the early plays the quiet, often wryly comic tone of the opening scenes is gradually replaced by something much more intense and horrific, and something considerably farther away from mundane considerations of likelihood. The probability of what happens, indeed, is never at issue: it is clear from the outset that this is a private world we have been permitted to enter, and as such, whatever relations with any outside world of objective reality we may imagine we perceive, it has its own consistency and carries its own conviction. In *The Room* neither the consistency nor the conviction is altogether unimpaired. The play was written in four days and sent off straight away with only minimum corrections to a friend at Bristol University. Unexpectedly, he offered to stage it, and so the text has become fixed in a form which Pinter now finds unsatisfactory. About the blind negro, the most evidently non-realistic character in his whole *oeuvre*, he now says: 'Well, it's very peculiar, when I got to that point in the play the man from the basement had to be introduced, and he just *was* a blind negro. I don't think there's anything radically wrong with the character in himself, but he behaves too differently from the other characters: if I were writing the play now I'd have him sit down, have a cup of tea . . .' So in *The Birthday Party* the characters who embody the menace already behave much more normally – realistically, we might say – in their relations with Meg, with Lulu, the buxom blonde from down the road, and even with Stanley. Menace, the play implies, is a matter of situation: it does not come from extraordinary, sinister people, but from ordinary people like you and me; it is all a matter of circumstances whether at some point I suddenly become the menace in your life or you the menace in mine, and not anything inherent in either of us. Already Pinter is closer to reality than he was in dealing with the blind negro, and in *The Dumb Waiter* he comes closer still by elaborating the point about the normality of those who menace when they are outside the context in which their menace is exerted, and by leaving the violence implied in the final tableau instead of having it directly enacted on the stage. From here it is a short step to *A Slight*

Ache, in which the nominal menace is completely passive and the real disruptive force exists in the mind of the menaced. There is no violence here at all, because no violence is needed.

The point at which this gradual change seems to crystallize in a single decision is in *The Caretaker*, where again we have the room, but no outside menace, simply a clash of personalities on the inside, and again we have to have one of the inhabitants displaced by another. Pinter has described his decision on how this should be done as follows:

At the end . . . there are two people alone in a room, and one of them must go in such a way as to produce a sense of complete separation and finality. I thought originally that the play must end with the violent death of one at the hands of the other. But then I realized, when I got to the point, that the characters as they had grown could never act in this way. . . .

In other words, here for the first time psychological realism overtly won out; these, as much as the inhabitants of 'The Black and White' are people existing, making their own decisions, creating the circumstances of their own lives, and not in any sense the puppets of fate, as were in many respects the characters of *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, and *The Dumb Waiter*. *The Caretaker* still works completely in terms of a private myth, as they did, but it gains in richness and complexity by also working completely, as they did not, on the quite different level at which comprehensible motivation comes into play: for the first time we can sensibly consider (if we want to) why the characters do what they do as well as, more obscurely, why what happens has the effect it does on us.

There are three characters: two brothers, Mick and Aston, and an old tramp, Davies, whom Aston has invited back to his room. Aston is strangely laconic and withdrawn, and it eventually emerges that he was in a mental home two years before and received electrical shock treatment which has left him as he is. His brother is trying to get through to him, to arouse his interest in something, and Aston has been collecting materials for some time with the intention of building a shed, but shows little sign of getting down to it. Davies, in fact, is the first thing

in which he has shown positive interest since the mental home; he likes him and likes his company. Mick's jealousy is instantly aroused, and his one thought is to get the old man out, but he can only do this satisfactorily from his own point of view if Aston voluntarily rejects him, so hiding his dislike behind a mask of flippancy Davies takes for good humour, he confides his plans to Davies and leads him on to suppose that he is quite amiably disposed and will hire him as caretaker for the house when it is fitted up. Davies falls into the trap by trying to play one brother against the other, rejecting Aston, his real friend, and throwing in his lot with Mick. He even goes so far as to curry favour with Mick by saying that his brother is mad, and then Mick has him where he wants him:

What a strange man you are. Aren't you? You're really strange. Ever since you come into this house there's been nothing but trouble. Honest, I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations. Most of what you say is lies. You're violent, you're erratic, you're just completely unpredictable. You're nothing else but a wild animal, when you come down to it, you're a barbarian. And to put the old tin lid on it, you stink from arse-hole to breakfast-time. Look at it. You come here recommending yourself as an interior decorator, whereupon I take you on, and what happens? You make a long speech about all the references you've got down at Sidcup, and what happens? I haven't noticed you go down to Sidcup to obtain them. It's all most regrettable, but it looks as though I'm compelled to pay you off for your caretaking work. Here's half a dollar.

Rejected by Mick, Davies tries desperately to make it up with Aston, but it is too late, and he has gone too far: Aston has determined to start work on his shed ('If I don't get it up now it'll never go up. Until it's up I can't get started.'), and there is no place in his life for Davies, who has no alternative before him as the curtain falls but to leave.

As the speech just quoted suggests, the style of *The Caretaker* is much more direct than that of Pinter's earlier plays. Everything that Aston says – suitably enough, considering his mental condition – is perfectly clear and unequivocal. And though Mick's mental processes are devious the intention behind everything he says is clear, even when he is talking apparently at random just

to unsettle the old man (there are several examples of this in the second act – the long irrelevant comparisons with his uncle and the bloke he knew in Shoreditch, the fantastic excursion in which he pretends to be letting the flat to Davies). Only Davies is subject in his conversation to the characteristic Pinter ambiguity, and this is here symptomatic not of the general unknowability of things, but of a specific intention on the character's part to cover his tracks and keep people guessing about himself. Not that there isn't a certain forlorn conviction in his assertions that everything would be right if only he could get down to Sidcup and collect his papers, but evidently this is a story he has told so often to excuse himself that now he himself half believes it – whether there is any truth in it at all we have no way of knowing. Whenever he is asked a direct question he either evades answering it directly (when asked if he is Welsh he replies, after a pause, 'Well, I been around, you know') or by offering an apparently unequivocal answer which ten minutes later he will contradict with another equally unequivocal statement.

Shortly before *The Caretaker* was produced Pinter provided a gloss on his use of this sort of contradiction and ambiguity in a programme note to the Royal Court production of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*.

✓ The desire for verification is understandable, but cannot always be satisfied. There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what false. The thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false. The assumption that to verify what has happened and what is happening presents few problems, I take to be inaccurate. A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experiences, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. The more acute the experience the less articulate its expression.

But as a moment's consideration shows, this applies much more readily to Pinter's earlier works than to those he was at that time writing. In *The Caretaker* verification is seldom a problem. If we want to know why Aston is as he is, he tells us in detail at the end of the second act, and no doubt is ever cast on

what he says. If we want to know exactly what Mick's game is, there is enough clear indication throughout, and even though his way of reaching his goal is rather indirect – necessarily if he is to edge the cunning old tramp out and at the same time make sure that Aston also wants him to leave – by the last act the intention underlying all he does becomes unmistakable. Only with Davies is there any difficulty about verification: we have no way of knowing whether he has really left any papers at Sidcup, what really happened at the monastery where he hoped to be given a pair of shoes (if it existed and if he ever went there), or which of the other recollections which scatter his conversation are true or false. But even here the desire for verification is nowhere near the forefront of our minds, because none of this, even by normal standards of play-making, is vital to our understanding (in the way that, for instance, we would normally require to know precisely what Stanley had done to bring judgement on him in *The Birthday Party*, who the blind negro in *The Room* was, who Edward in *A Slight Ache* thinks the match-seller might be). All we need to understand about Davies for the purposes of the play is that he is shifty, unreliable, and probably incapable of telling the truth even if he wanted: his evasions and contradictions imply a judgement on him, but not necessarily on the world around him.

In fact, the play seems to be built upon a proposition new in Pinter's work, one which he has expressed as 'simple truth can often be something much more terrifying than ambiguity and doubt'. The classic instance of this is Aston's speech at the end of Act II, when he explains about his experiences before, during, and after his treatment at the mental home. As first performed, this seemed quite out of context, being made into a direct, self-pitying appeal for sentimental sympathy, a thin patch representing a weak point in the intricately woven texture of the whole work. But when one studies the play in print it becomes obvious that it is, in fact, no such radical departure from the style of the rest of the play; Aston, indeed, never speaks – could never speak – in any other style, and there is no basic ambiguity in the play to make this a single deviation into unequivocal sense artistically impossible. If the monologue were played, as the rest of the text

demands it be played, impersonally, almost entirely without expression, as though the speaker were under hypnosis or describing something which happened to someone else, it would become legitimately the climax of horror in the play, the inevitable moment of reckoning with the past – Stanley's ordeal, in effect, but this time self-inflicted, and therefore something from which Aston can begin to recover in the third act by resolving anew really to get started on his shed.

This new directness and simplicity is to be found also in the television-cum-radio play Pinter was writing immediately before, *A Night Out*, and his next television play *Night School*. In *A Night Out* the protagonist, Albert, suffers from the attentions of a clinging, possessive mother, and the play chronicles his attempts to escape from her for one evening. First there is a firm's party he has to go to and which his mother blandly refuses to take into account by disregarding everything he says on the subject. When he finally shakes her off and goes everything goes wrong, the whole thing culminating in a 'liberty' taken by the old employee in whose honour the party is given with a young woman, for which Albert is blamed. He leaves, and on his return has to suffer a long, self-pitying monologue from his mother embodying a series of variations on her favourite theme, that if he wants to go out and leave her he must be leading an unclean life, 'mucking about with girls' or frequenting low pubs.

The end of the second act leaves him, the worm turned at last, poised with a clock above his head as though about to attack her, and exactly what has happened remains in doubt until the end of the third. When we next encounter Albert he is succumbing to the advances of a terribly genteel prostitute, with whom he exchanges fantasies: he is an assistant director in films, she a respectable mother with a daughter at a select boarding-school near Hereford. But finally, the suppressed violence in his mind coming to the surface, he threatens her, too, with a clock, obviously substituting her for his mother. ('Who do you think you are? You talk too much, you know that? You never stop talking. Just because you're a woman you think you can get away with it. . . . You're all the same, you see, you're all the same, you're just a dead weight around my neck.') He shatters

her dream about a daughter by demonstrating that the photograph is actually of her as a child, and then having exercised his power over her by making her put on and do up his shoes he leaves and returns home to a tearful, forgiving, and quite unharmed mother, ready to stifle him as much as ever with her neurotic solicitude. The night out is over.

Here again the question of verification and its problems does not arise; the motivation of all the characters is made quite clear, and even the one or two points on which some doubt exists are rapidly cleared up: the photograph in the prostitute's room is proved to be of herself by an inscription on the back, and the perpetrator of the 'liberty', left in doubt in the radio version of the play, is unequivocally identified in the television version. (The script direction reads: 'The camera closes on Mr Ryan's hand, resting comfortably on his knee, and then to his face which, smiling vaguely, is inclined to the ceiling. It must be quite clear from the expression that it was his hand which strayed.') Instead, the play concerns itself with the working out of the relationship between Albert and his mother, and the impossibility of their communicating with one another, or at least the impossibility of his communicating with her. Albert is more intelligent than his mother, but he is weak, and so her stupidity makes her impregnable: she just cannot, or will not, understand anything which does not suit her, and when he goes against her wishes she regards this not as evidence that he is an adult with a mind of his own, but simply as the wilfulness of a child, to be rebuked but not taken too seriously. It is the Stanley-Meg situation over again, except that this time Albert has not chosen it and resents it; he has not discovered, as Stanley has, the way of turning his mother's stupidity to his own purpose, and all his gestures of rebellion are impotent. Though he insists on going to the party, once he has his way guilt overtakes him and he tries to get out of it by feigning illness; the party itself is bound to be disastrous for him because he has insisted on going against his mother's wishes. And even when he resorts to physical violence he cannot win: he has to be content with a substitute victory against a substitute victim, the prostitute to whom he pours out the reproaches about her endless talking and the matter of the light in Grandma's

bedroom which should by rights be directed at his mother. The final insult, perhaps, is his mother's willingness, after all this has happened, to forget everything and let things be just as they were before, since it is the final demonstration that Albert does not count and nothing he can do really matters.

A Night Out offers convincing proof, if proof were needed, that Pinter does not rely in his plays entirely on his ingenuity in thinking up situations of horror and mystery and then giving them a superficial reality by exploiting his undeniable skill at capturing in his dialogue the precise nuances of everyday speech. As in *The Caretaker*, the people in it make their situations rather than being created by them, and in so far as the situations in *A Night Out* are nearer the world in which most of us live than those in *The Caretaker*, we are better able to appreciate at once Pinter's success in the mode of psychological realism. And this, even though the integrity of his dramatic private world remains unimpaired: the myopically detailed obsessive quality of his observation is just as much in evidence here as before and the effect is to charge a story which could be treated in a simple, conventionally 'realistic' fashion (something one could hardly say of any of the earlier plays) with the sort of feverish intensity which Alain Robbe-Grillet at his best sometimes achieves. In fact, the play demonstrates again a basic fact in Pinter's work – that it often seems least realistic when it is closest to actuality. For the form of the dialogue, with its constant leap-frogging and casting-back in sense, its verbal misunderstandings, anticipations which prove to be mistaken, mishearings and all the other characteristics of everyday speech which most dramatists iron out into a logical grammatical *lingua franca* which passes on the stage for realistic speech, recalls rather the sort of photopuzzles *Lilliput* used to publish in its heyday, in which details of familiar objects would be vastly enlarged so that the grains and textures stood out with hallucinatory precision and all the normal associative connotations were stripped from them. In effect this is reality turned against itself, for showing something so closely with such fanatical accuracy makes it seem far less real and familiar than the conventional simplifications of our normal dilatory middle view.

Pinter's next television play, *Night School*, takes up again and develops certain themes from *A Night Out*, but their handling is rather arbitrary and the author has subsequently decided not to publish it, saying that it contains 'characteristics that implied I was slipping into a formula. It so happens this was the worst thing I have written. The words and ideas had become automatic, redundant.' Certainly the main thing to strike one about it in performance was the low level of intensity at which it worked: obviously intended to be a light comedy exploiting the new realistic vein in Pinter's work, it failed mainly because it seemed that the author had deliberately reduced the mechanical interest of his plot (all the ambiguities are resolved completely in a way which offers no surprises) in order to let his characters act and interact very much as they do in *The Caretaker* and *A Night Out*, but then failed to create characters interesting enough to hold our attention on this level.

A number of the old themes are recapitulated in various ways: the basic conflict of the play, for instance, is a battle for the possession of a room which represents for the protagonist, Walter, an unsuccessful forger just home from prison, quiet and security. ('If I could have my room back I could get down to work . . . think about things.') Unfortunately in his absence his aunts have let it to an apparently genteel, respectable young woman who claims that she teaches in a night school. Again the minor ambiguities and contradictions are significant in terms of character rather than as implied comments on reality: Walter is a liar, but he lies to achieve his various purposes and the discrepancies between his various statements seem only to tell us more about him; the old scrap-dealer Solto is an inveterate boaster, but the truth or otherwise of his boasts never comes into question. In fact, the problem of verification resolves itself into one single question: is Sally, the supposed night-school teacher, what she seems, or is she really the night-club entertainer to whom she bears a quite inexplicable resemblance? And this question is answered for us, unsurprisingly, before the end; the two Sallys are, in fact, one, and when Walter seems to be getting too warm in his attempts to establish their identity she leaves.

The connexion of all this with the last act of *A Night Out* is obvious: it might almost be a portrait of the girl there as seen through the eyes of the other occupants of the house where she lives (apparently respectable enough for her visitors to have to creep round in stockinged feet). A number of details are also carried over: the play with the photograph of Sally in a gym slip recalls the other girl's deception with a photograph of herself when young, and Walter's strange bout of obsessive order-giving, when he makes Sally repeatedly cross and uncross her legs, recalls Albert's orders to the other girl – except that there the scene had its dramatic *raison d'être*, while here it seems merely arbitrary, arising from nothing we know of in Walter's character and serving no apparent purpose in the play as a whole except to give it a sensational highlight. The main point of interest about *Night School*, in fact, is its demonstration that Pinter can, like anyone else, make his mistakes, but that (a) he is the first to acknowledge them, and (b) even when his imagination is working at decidedly less than full throttle he still remains true to his world and produces something which, though markedly inferior to his best work, could still have been written by no one else.

His third television play, *The Collection*, shows perfectly what he has learnt from the failure of *Night School*; like that it is deliberately slight, a comedy of manners with no pretensions to any further significance, but unlike its predecessor it is on its chosen level completely successful. For on this occasion the plot framework is absolutely firm: there is a question to be answered, but the answer remains teasingly out of reach – 'teasingly' being the operative word, for this is not a life-and-death matter, but simply a puzzle that two of the main characters have to work out about the other two, and which despite a number of false starts and apparent successes, they ultimately fail to disentangle. Something happened a few days ago in Leeds between Stella, the manageress of a smart *boutique*, and Bill, a young dress designer. Stella has told her husband James that Bill made love to her, and James sets out to discover the truth by an amiable terrorization of Bill (the menace of the earlier plays given background: to Bill, James is at first a nameless and inexplicable terror from outside, but we know why he is doing what he is doing).

At first Bill denies that anything happened, then agrees and starts to elaborate. But there is another party interested, Harry, a suave middle-aged art fancier, who, as he tells us, found Bill in the gutter and with whom Bill lives on terms of suspicious intimacy. While James is persuading Bill to corroborate Stella's story, Harry is persuading Stella to retract it and say that nothing really happened at Leeds at all. Harry arrives back just as James is getting threatening and indulging in a little knife-throwing (none too successfully; again, the menace is humanized), and when faced with Stella's new version of the incident Bill breaks down and agrees that in fact all that happened was that they sat in the hall for two hours talking about how things would be if they made love. It sounds like the truth, but at the final fadeout James has returned to the attack with Stella and is getting no satisfactory answer from her. . . .

The piece works, like the early plays, as a thoroughly efficient mechanism for mystifying the audience, but this time it works for their amusement rather than their terrorization. It is an elaborate game, by the rules of which, clearly, we are permitted practically every possible combination of the principals except that of the two people, Bill and Stella, who were actually present on the occasion in question (if they *were* there, of course), and who alone could perhaps tell us what really happened. For the moment the piece represents Pinter's last word on the subjects of menace and verification, the two obsessive preoccupations of his early work, and it cannot be entirely coincidental that he has his say completely in terms of comedy.

To deal with *The Collection* where it clearly belongs, along with *A Night Out* and *Night School*, however, we have left out a radio play, *The Dwarfs*, which was first performed between *Night School* and *The Collection* and represents a very interesting departure for Pinter, carrying him off in quite a new direction which may or may not prove significant in his further development; it is certainly his most difficult play to date and the most daunting to popular taste. As a matter of fact, its genesis dates back a number of years, to the long, unpublished novel of the same title Pinter wrote between 1953 and 1957. In that there were four main characters, three men and a girl, but in the play only

the three men appear, Pete, Mark, and Len. Pete and Mark as we encounter them are 'typical Pinter characters'; they indulge in dilatory, inconsequential conversations with each other and with Len, avoiding real communication as far as possible. Our clearest picture of them comes from Len, with his images of them: Pete, walking by the river, cruel and predatory like a gull, digging under a stone in the mud; Mark, sitting smooth and complacent by his fireside, like a spider in his web. But they are for us almost entirely projections of Len's consciousness; each is convinced that the other is bad for Len, that not Len but only he can manage the other, and this is almost all we know of them objectively: this, and that vanity is the dominant force in Mark's character – otherwise completely negative, he is stirred to action only when he learns from Len that Pete thinks he is a fool.

But Len is a very different case; we learn a lot more about him, and in a way that is completely new in Pinter's writing – we are actually allowed to enter his mind. We have never really known what went on in the minds of Pinter characters before, and the mystery of what they could possibly be thinking, the tension between the known and the unknown, was a large part of the earlier plays' fascination. In the later plays the characters become noticeably more scrutable; we can guess quite often what is in their minds, but except for Aston's speech in *The Caretaker*, we are never told. The freedom of radio has allowed Pinter in this play, however, to switch at will from ordinary conversation to a stream-of-consciousness monologue, and monologue, moreover, from a stream of consciousness far wider and deeper and more turbulent than Aston's, for while Aston is numbed as a result of his shock treatment at the mental home, Len still has that desperate remedy to come; he is hovering on the brink of insanity, and when we leave him is perhaps already in a mental home. (Or is he? It depends whether Pete is being evasive when he says that Len is in hospital suffering from 'kidney trouble', or simply stating a fact.)

The creatures which bedevil Len's mind are the dwarfs, who are ever busy gobbling up garbage, organizing and arranging, observing Len, Pete, and Mark, until finally, mysteriously, they leave. Who are they? What are they? Well, who is anyone, come

to that? This is the central theme of the play, summed up in Len's climactic speech to Mark:

The point is, who are you? Not why or how, not even what. I can see what, perhaps, clearly enough. But who are you? It's no use saying you know who you are just because you tell me you can fit your particular key into a particular slot which will duly receive your particular key because that's not foolproof and certainly not conclusive. Just because you're inclined to make these statements of faith has nothing to do with me. It's not my business. Occasionally I believe I perceive a little of what you are, but that's pure accident. Pure accident on both our parts, the perceived and the perceiver. It's nothing like an accident, it's deliberate, it's a joint pretence. We depend on these accidents, on these contrived accidents, to continue. It's not important then that it's conspiracy or hallucination. What you are, or appear to be to me, or appear to be to you, changes so quickly, so horrifyingly, I certainly can't keep up with it and I'm damn sure you can't either. But who you are I can't even begin to recognize, and sometimes I recognize it so wholly, so forcibly, I can't look, and how can I be certain of what I see? You have no number. Where am I to look, where am I to look, what is there to locate, so as to have some surety, to have some rest from this whole bloody racket? You're the sum of so many reflections. How many reflections? Is that what you consist of? What scum does the tide leave? What happens to the scum? When does it happen? I've seen what happens. But I can't speak when I see it. I can only point a finger. I can't even do that. The scum is broken and sucked back. I don't see where it goes, I don't see when, what do I see, what have I seen? What have I seen, the scum or the essence? What about it? Does all this give you the right to stand there and tell me you know who you are? It's a bloody impertinence. . . .

Here a number of themes implicit in Pinter's later works come to the surface. Little by little the desire for verification has shifted from the audience into the play they are watching; instead of watching with a degree of mystification the manoeuvres of a group of characters who seem perfectly to understand what they are doing but simply offer us no means of sharing that understanding, we are now required to watch understandingly the manoeuvres of people who do not understand their situation but are trying laboriously to establish the truth about it. And this truth goes beyond the mere verification of single facts (except, perhaps, in the comedies) to a quest for the how and the why,

the who and the what, at a deeper level than demonstrable fact. This involves a new preoccupation with the means of communication, since the question comes back, will people tell the truth about themselves, and if they will, can they? Everyone wants to know the truth about others without letting them know the truth about him – the feeling that once someone is called by his true name he is in the power of the caller lies deep. Pinter has said that his characters are ‘at the extreme edge of their living, where they are living pretty much alone’. Even if the disposition to communicate at this level exists at all, it is a possibility? Reality itself is so complex, and changes so quickly, that our only hope is an unspoken conspiracy whereby we tacitly agree to accept certain formulas as true, some constant patterns beneath the constantly changing surface of things. A man may change alarmingly from moment to moment, but for the sake of argument we presume that there is one coherent being underneath; the tide may come and go, the scum be broken and sucked back, but behind the superficial restlessness and change lies the monumental consistency of the unchanging sea.

But is this so? Significantly, the only people in Pinter’s plays who appear to tell the whole truth, into whose minds indeed we are permitted to look, are madmen – one permanently mutilated in the course of his ‘cure’, the other clearly tottering, when we meet him, on the brink of a complete breakdown. If Aston allows himself to be wholly known it is only because, as he is now, there is little to know; and though Len speaks directly to us, as far as possible, by way of an internal monologue, the more we learn about him the less we really know him. Between *The Room* and *The Dwarfs* we have in effect run the complete dramatic gamut from total objectivity to total subjectivity, and discovered in the process that there are no clear-cut explanations of anything. At one end of the scale no motives are explained and everything remains mysterious; at the other as many motives as possible are expounded for us, and if anything the result is more mystifying than before. It is only from a middle distance, as in *The Caretaker* and *A Night Out*, that we can see a picture simple enough to hold out the possibility that we may understand it, that we are given enough in the way of motive to reach some

provisional conclusions on the characters and their actions. It is a perfect demonstration of the conspiracy on which normal human intercourse relies, and incidentally of the knife-edge on which dramatic 'realism' rests: if we were told a little less about what is going on it would be incomprehensible, but if we were told a little more the difficulty of establishing any single coherent truth would be just as great.

In fact, the great paradox of Pinter's career, by the normal standards of the theatre, is that the more 'realistic' he is, the less real. With most dramatists the sort of compromise by selection which permits us to feel we have a sufficient understanding of the characters and motives in *The Caretaker* and *A Night Out* is the nearest they get to reality; it seems like reality because in life we often assume much the same (generally on quite insufficient evidence) and anyway the idea that we can safely make such assumptions is reassuring. But in his other works Pinter has, to our great discomfort, stripped these illusions from us: we cannot understand other people; we cannot even understand ourselves; and the truth of any situation is almost always beyond our grasp. If this is true in life, why should it not be true in the theatre? 'A character on stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things.'

Or in other words, instead of regarding Pinter as the purveyor of dramatic fantasy he is usually taken for, we might equally regard him as the stage's most ruthless and uncompromising naturalist. The structure of his characters' conversations, and even the very forms of expression they use, are meticulously exact in their notation of the way people really speak (and this is as true of his best-educated characters as of his least; compare *The Collection* with 'Last to Go'), while in his minutely detailed study there is seldom room for the easy generalization, even in his most explicit plays, *The Caretaker* and *A Night Out*. But to label him simply as a naturalist so truthful that his audiences have refused to recognize themselves in the mirror leaves several important elements in his drama out of account.

First, there is his mastery of construction, which is anything but naturalistic – life never shapes itself so neatly. Not only can he handle to perfection the one-act form, working up little by little to one decisive climax, but he can also sustain a three-act drama with complete mastery. (He himself says: ‘I am very concerned with the shape and consistency of mood in my plays. I cannot write anything which appears to me to be loose and unfinished. I like a feeling of order in what I write.’) Of course, this is not to say that he writes what we usually mean by the ‘well-made play’, with its formal expositions, confrontations, and last-act revelations; for him much of the point of life is that we usually do come in half-way through a story and never quite catch up, that the two vitally concerned parties never do meet, that letter which will explain all and round things off neatly is probably never opened. And so instead his plays are usually built on lines easier to explain in musical terms. They are, one might say, rhapsodic rather than symphonic, being held together by a series of internal tensions, one of the most frequent being the tension between two opposing tonalities (notably the comic versus the horrific, the light or known versus the dark or unknown) or two contrasted tempi (in duologue there is usually one character considerably quicker than the other in understanding, so that he is several steps ahead while the other lags painfully behind). The resolution of these tensions used to be in a bout of violence, when one key would at last establish an unmistakable ascendancy (usually the horrific would vanquish the comic, the forces of disruption establish a new order in place of the old), but in the later works Pinter has shown new skill and resourcefulness in reconciling the warring elements or ending more subtly and equally convincingly on a teasingly unresolved discord.

This musical analogy points also to the other element in his drama which effectively removes it from the naturalistic norm; what, for want of a better word, we might call his orchestration. Studying the unsupported line of the dialogue bit by bit we might well conclude that it is an exact reproduction of everyday speech, and so, bit by bit, it is. But it is ‘orchestrated’ with overtones and reminiscences, with unexpected resonances from what has gone

before, so that the result is a tightly knit and intricate texture of which the 'naturalistic' words being spoken at any given moment are only the top line, supported by elusive and intricate harmonies, or appearing sometimes in counterpoint with another theme from earlier in the play. It is this which gives Pinter's work its unusual and at first glance inexplicable weight and density; until we understand the process we are unable to account reasonably for the obsessive fascination the most apparently banal exchanges exert in his plays.

If Pinter's plays are the most 'musical' of the new British drama, however, it follows that they are the most poetic, because what else is music in words but poetry? Far more than the fantasticated verse plays of Christopher Fry and his followers, or the verse-in-disguise plays of T. S. Eliot, his works are the true poetic drama of our time, for he alone has fully understood that poetry in the theatre is not achieved merely by couching ordinary sentiments in an elaborately artificial poetic diction, like Fry, or writing what is formally verse but not appreciable to the unwarned ear as anything but prose, like Eliot. Instead he has looked at life so closely that, seeing it through his eyes, we discover the strange sublunary poetry which lies in the most ordinary objects at the other end of a microscope. At this stage all question of realism or fantasy, naturalism or artifice becomes irrelevant, and indeed completely meaningless: whatever we think of his plays, whether we accept or reject them, they are monumentally and inescapably there, the artifact triumphantly separated from the artist, self-contained and self-supporting. Because he has achieved this, and he alone among British dramatists of our day, the conclusion seems inescapable that even if others may be more likeable, more approachable, more sympathetic to one's own personal tastes and convictions, in the long run he is likely to turn out the greatest of them all.

Epilogue

Art and Commerce: *with a few tentative conclusions*

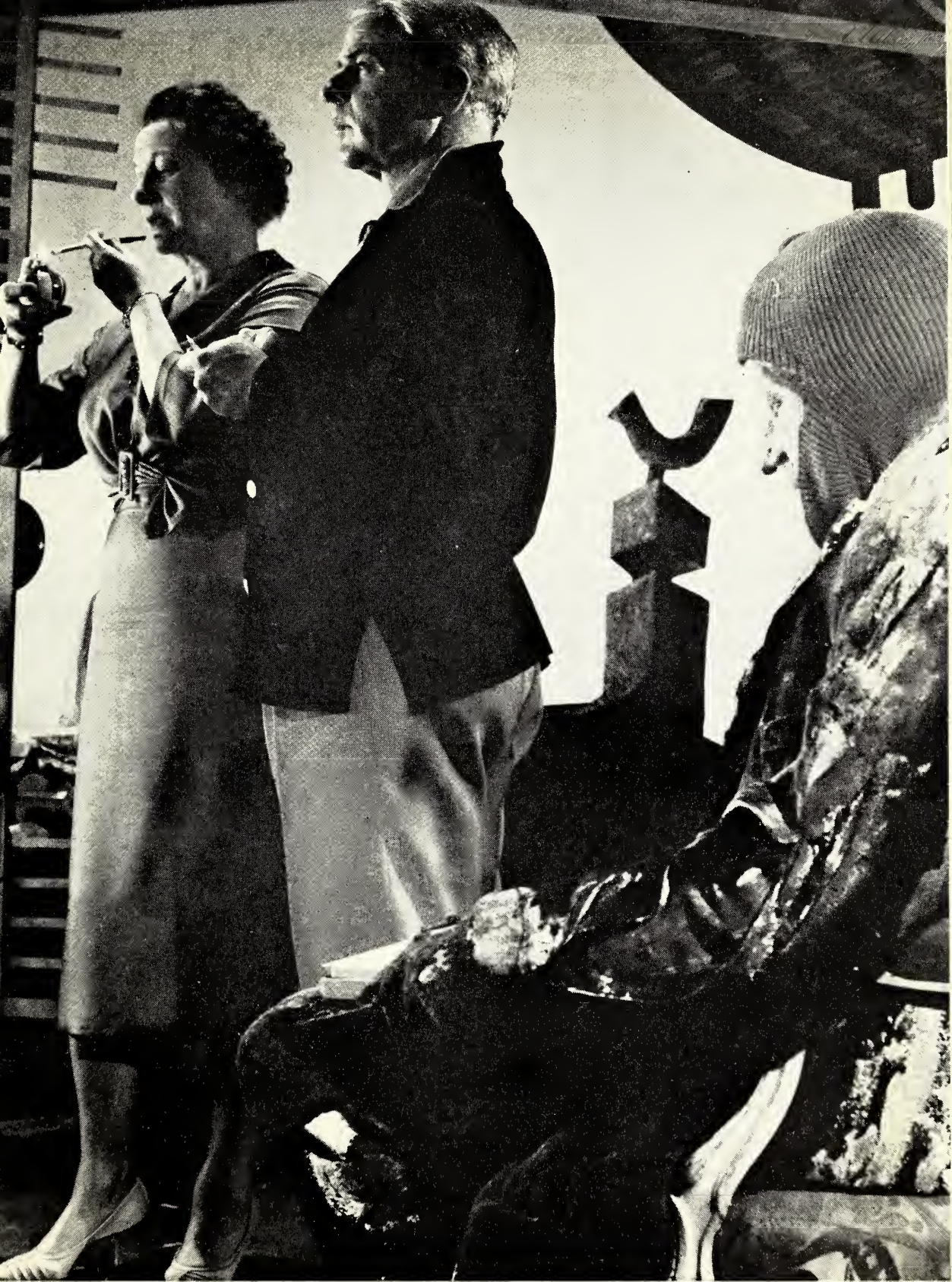
THOUGH, AS WE HAVE seen in the foregoing pages, a considerable number of plays by dramatists under forty have been produced, one way or another, since 1956, their position as part of the ordinary life of the commercial theatre remains unsettled. These have been the big successes – *Look Back in Anger*, *The Entertainer*, *The Caretaker* – and many of the productions have at least covered their costs, if not a little more. On the other hand, a number of dramatists, Arden being the most obvious example, have not yet won through to any sort of success with the public at all, and when an example of the new drama fails, it is all too easy to blame the failure on its newness. Not, of course, that the old drama has shown itself much more reliable: when even Rattigan can produce a disaster taken off after four performances we might fairly suppose that nothing in this world is certain, and Michael Codron, the most enterprising of our commercial managers (he put on *The Caretaker*, *The Birthday Party*, *Three, Stop It*, *Whoever You Are*, *Pieces of Eight* and several more in the same vein), ruefully admits that he has had his biggest hits with those he least expected, while on the whole he has lost most money on the obviously ‘safe’ commercial ventures. But, be that as it may, ‘the new drama’ is a label which can easily be called in evidence against its (probably unwilling) owner; if his play does not do well, there must be some reason, and those nearest to hand will certainly be ‘The public isn’t ready for it’, ‘The public doesn’t like all this gloom and mystification’, ‘The public just wants a good traditional laugh or cry with no complications’.

It must be mentioned, however, that the mere fact of being under forty does not inevitably condemn the writer to suffering this sort of complaint; there are several dramatists under forty who are hardly tarred with the ‘new drama’ brush at all, and who can float comfortably on the margin of any controversy which may arise, ready to be called in misleadingly to bolster either

side's case at a moment's notice. ('There now, you liked that and yet the writer's one of these new young men', or alternatively 'Well, if ——— can write a good straightforward play with a plot and characters and something to hold your interest, I don't see why the rest of these young fellows should consider it beneath them.') They are, on the whole, the sort of capable, workman-like professional writer who would have made his way at any time, writing in whatever style happened to be most pleasing to audiences at the moment and making a good, sound job of it, but any connexion with the new drama which might be implied by their emergence since 1956 is purely coincidental.

The principal exception to this rule, since he has at certain stages very deliberately linked himself with the new drama and been accepted by unwary critics as one of its most adventurous exponents, is Willis Hall, author of *The Long and the Short and the Tall* (anthologized in the Penguin *New English Dramatists* series) and several profitable collaborations with the novelist Keith Waterhouse. Hall (born 1929) is the complete professional, author of over eighty radio and television scripts by himself and any number of adaptations and collaborations — at present he and Waterhouse between them seem to be working on the scripts of every second British film — among which there are only two or three which really give him even the faintest claim to membership of the dramatic new wave.

The best known and most highly praised of these are *The Long and the Short and the Tall*, commissioned by Oxford Theatre Group and first performed by them at the Edinburgh Festival in 1958 under the title *Disciplines of War*, and *Last Day in Dreamland*, a one-acter originally written for television and later staged in a double bill at the Lyric, Hammersmith. These both have all the marks of post-Osborne drama (indeed, Hall is probably the writer in whom direct influence from Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* especially, is most unmistakable): in each there is a Jimmy Porter-like central character with a fund of angry rhetoric which he directs indiscriminately and almost unopposed at anyone within reach, and in each only one side of the typical Osborne ambivalence towards the neurotic and in general insufferable protagonist is allowed to show through; if Jimmy



14. 'A Slight Ache'



15. 'No Trams to Lime Street'

emerges as heroic almost in spite of Osborne's apparent intentions, Bamforth and Fentrill, though equally neurotic, equally insufferable, are clearly the objects of the playwright's sympathy right from the beginning. In so far, that is, as anyone has the playwright's sympathy, since despite the fashionable displays of hysteria and liberal principle (about war in one play, unemployment in the other) both plays have, on reflection, very much the air of being constructed to satisfy a certain taste in the audience rather than to express anything very close to the author's heart (it is noticeable that the only passage in either of them which comes over as genuinely felt, Sergeant Mitcham's diatribe against women in Act II of *The Long and the Short and the Tall*, is quite out of character and seems to have no organic connexion with the rest of the play at all).

Each has a situation patently rigged for anger (how J. W. Lambert can say in his introduction to *New English Dramatists 3* that 'anger has no place in [Hall's] work' mystifies me): in *The Long and the Short and the Tall* it is the predicament of a group of soldiers lost in the Malayan jungle during the Japanese advance on Singapore in 1942, lumbered with a Japanese prisoner who is first a pet, then a source of danger, and finally, indirectly (when a sentry shoots him in a fit of panic) the cause of their discovery and extermination; in *Last Day in Dreamland* a seaside amusement arcade (representing the commercial degradation of popular taste) on the last day of the season, with the employees about to lose their £8-a-week jobs (surely it could never be so little?) and facing the rigours of six months' unemployment ahead. The central characters, Bamforth and Fentrill, are almost identical: the hectoring angry young man who knows it all and stands for most of the time in the centre of the stage, aquiver as a rule (whether the situation warrants it or not) with almost hysterical intensity, berating the other characters, who in each case, rather mysteriously, accept him as a natural leader and the life and soul of the party. The indebtedness to *Look Back in Anger* is unmistakable: the central character – and docile reaction to him which is the least credible part of Osborne's play – is just transferred lock, stock, and barrel to another context and given a few new twists with some professional adroitness but no genuine originality.

The doubts one experiences in direct contact with either play, the feeling that after all the author may be just jumping for the moment on the angry band-wagon because it is the thing to do, find a measure of confirmation if we look at his other work. *Last Day in Dreamland* was originally part of trilogy for television, and was staged at Hammersmith with another section, *A Glimpse of the Sea*, a comedy-drama about seaside infidelity in a quite different style nearer to that of Tad Mosel perhaps than any other; the third section, *A Ride on the Donkeys*, to confuse matters still further, is a broad North Country comedy about a young donkeyman with in-law troubles (the horrific wedding reception seems to be the prototype for the similar scene in the Hall-Waterhouse *Celebration*) which disconcertingly turns into a drama halfway through and is even more disconcertingly tricked out with whimsical prologue and interludes at a bureaucratic version of the Pearly Gates. Among Hall's other television plays are a sequel to the seaside trilogy, *Return to the Sea*; a pretentious and implausible Northern variation on the Antigone theme, *Afternoon for Antigone*; a conventional problem play about a girl's battle to keep the secret of her brother's cowardice from their mother (*Air Mail from Cyprus*); an exotic children's serial later turned into a stage play (*The Royal Astrologer*), and another trilogy, this time tending to the farcical, about life in a North Country brass band. All of them are capably put together, but it would be very difficult indeed to find in them evidences of any single creative personality at work; they might easily have been written by a committee.

Apart from *Chin-Chin*, an adaptation from the French of François Billeldoux, most of Hall's recent work for stage and screen has been in collaboration with Keith Waterhouse, and this on the whole is more lively and original, though one suspects that the virtues of *Billy Liar* (adapted from Waterhouse's novel) and particularly *Celebration* have been rather overestimated by critics unfamiliar with the norm of traditional North Country comedy from which in various measures they deviate (they are original, particularly *Billy Liar*, but not all that original). Anyway, they are very pleasant and entertaining, if a bit long-drawn-out and unvarying in their attack, and the ear of one or both

partners for the patterns of everyday speech has been put to good use, as it has, even more noticeably because in less favourable circumstances, in their screen adaptation of Mary Hayley Bell's novel *Whistle Down the Wind*, where the children in particular are observed with unusual acuteness and realism.

At least the second of our old-style professionals to emerge in the middle of the new drama, Robert Bolt, has never sought to be allied with his more enterprising contemporaries in the public mind. He is, basically, a good, traditional playwright whose approach to his craft (and the products of it) is not so different from that of, say, Terence Rattigan. He admits that the breakthrough effected by Osborne no doubt made it easier for his plays to be put on (presumably since the fact that he was born in 1924 was no longer in itself such a strong argument against production), but one can hardly suppose that his commercial and critical success would have been long delayed had he come to drama any time in the last thirty years. The extreme limits of his style are marked at one end by the complete realism of *The Critic and the Heart* and at the other by the discreet adventure into impressionistic staging, half-Brecht, half B.B.C. historical documentary, of *A Man for All Seasons* (the device of a common-man figure, half in, half out of the action may owe something to Brecht's heroic theatre, but surely owes a lot more to Bolt's apprenticeship as a radio scriptwriter). His two best-known plays, *Flowering Cherry* and *The Tiger and the Horse*, are somewhere in between, 'uneasily straddled', as Bolt himself puts it, 'between naturalism and non-naturalism': on the whole they are realistic in technique, but at their climaxes they both try, not altogether happily, to comprehend something beyond realism (Jim Cherry's vision, Gwendoline Dean's mad scene). In this at least they are experimental, but only very discreetly, with nothing to put off the most conservative playgoer or disconcert H. M. Tennent, who have wisely chosen Bolt as the object of their solitary flirtation with the younger dramatist. In all his plays (the others worth noting are his first stage play, *The Last of the Wine*, and an ambitious radio play *The Drunken Sailor*) Bolt offers substantial acting parts for substantial actors (hence his success in attracting such luminaries as Sir Ralph Richardson,

Sir Michael Redgrave, and Paul Scofield) and well-made, reliable entertainment for intelligent people, but there are not many theatregoers who could claim to look forward to his next play with any real quickening of excitement.

The third of our 'commercial' dramatists, Beverley Cross, has up to now had his major successes out of town: his two most notable plays began their lives at Liverpool and Nottingham respectively. He shares with Bolt an academic concern for form, but carries it to extremes, with the result that *One More River* in particular must be one of the most neurotically well-made plays on record, with every 'dramatic' revelation, every ironic reversal of fortune in its involved tale of a merchant ship mutiny coming in just where most expected with a clockwork precision that ultimately proves not only faintly unnerving but destructive of any real dramatic effect. *Strip the Willow*, which foundered at Golders Green on its way to the West End, is in a quite different convention, aiming, it seems, at being a neo-Shavian comedy of ideas about an ill-assorted group of survivors from a nuclear disaster. The quotation from which the title is adapted implies that 'Strip the Willow' – a country dance – is, in fact, a sort of *totentanz*, and the conclusion suggests that it has all been meant very seriously, but if this is so what comes in between – a sort of atom-age *Admirable Crichton* – allows us too often to lose sight of the underlying theme in a plethora of farcical incident, and suggests that Cross has not yet mastered the distinction between comedy with ideas and comedy of ideas.

Though no one would think of bracketing them with the new drama, it is perhaps just worth reminding ourselves that three of our most reliable purveyors of light entertainment, John Chapman, author of *Dry Rot*, *Simple Spymen* and other Whitehall and film farces, Julian Slade, creator of *Salad Days* and several less agreeable musical fantasies, and Sandy Wilson, unclassifiable and sophisticated deviser of *The Boy Friend*, *The Buccaneer*, and *Valmouth* (the last at any rate eccentric and in its chi-chi fashion experimental enough to deserve honourable mention) are all still under forty. So, for that matter, is Leo Lehman, whose large and heterogeneous output (a saint's life for Lichfield, a musical for Coventry, a series about life in a secondary

modern common-room for B.B.C. Television) includes at least one play, *Who Cares?* of well-meant protest. And in the days of its decline the Arts, once a regular source of theatrical excitement, but now mainly the home of commercial tryouts (Michael Codron has opened *The Caretaker*, *Three*, and *Stop It, Whoever You Are* there) and plays apparently staged at the authors' expense, has produced one or two new playwrights of at least passing interest, most notably Robert Shaw, whose ambitious and uneven *Off the Mainland* has been followed by two remarkable novels and a powerful television version of the first, *The Hiding Place*; Roger Gellert, whose *Quaint Honour* handled a difficult subject – *amitiés particulières* at a public school – frankly, realistically, and without sanctimoniousness or sentimentality; Johnny Speight, whose bitter and obsessive comedy *The Knacker's Yard*, though heavily influenced by Pinter, did much to confirm the promise of his earlier television play *The Compartment*; and Kenneth Jupp, whose elaborate Pirandellian exercise *The Buskers* seemed to some promising, but has been followed only by *My Representative* and *Strangers in the Room*, two television plays of unrelieved banality. Elsewhere there has been *The Tinker*, a spirited bit of Jimmy-Porterage from the provinces by Lawrence Dobie and Robert Sloman, not to mention the plays of two young Americans acclimatized to the British stage, J. P. Donleavy (*The Ginger Man*, *Fairy Tales of New York*) and Murray Schisgal (*Schrecks*, *Ducks and Lovers*).

There are probably others, but it is time to stop splashing among the shallows and try to produce some sort of conclusion. Who are the real hopes of the British theatre? What general trends, if any, can be seen? Is it becoming more or less popular with the general public? To take the last question first, since to a large extent the work of new playwrights will ultimately depend, like that of any other sort, on its commercial viability for survival: the much-touted revolution in taste seems still to be continuing: the incomprehensibles of yesterday, like Pinter and Simpson, are today box-office draws without making any obvious concessions; television is habituating a vast audience to the poetic realism of Owen and Exton, or even the rougher, more extravagant ballad-drama of Arden (*Soldier, Soldier* is in fact the

only, albeit distant, approach to popular success he has achieved); quite conventional, old-fashioned theatregoers find that the plot-sense is beginning to elude them, so that they are happy even in traditionally plotted plays just to watch the characters interacting without wanting desperately to know where it is all leading. This might all prove to be just a fad, a phase, of course, but whether it does depends largely on the playwrights concerned. If all they have to offer is novelty it will quickly pall (I can hardly imagine that the fascination of Simpson's comic methods will last for very long, and the element of preaching in Wesker's work will surely militate against it once the exoticism, by Shaftesbury Avenue standards, of his backgrounds has faded). But if there is something more, the possibility of development, then there is no reason why the conquests of the new drama should not be preserved and consolidated. This possibility of development has, in fact, already shown itself, and is showing itself: with the arguable exception of John Mortimer and N. F. Simpson, none of the writers we have been considering seems content merely to stand still: if any general trend can be discerned, it is a gradual move away from naturalism, represented by the increasing employment of Brechtian techniques derived from the heroic theatre (Osborne, Arden), increasing recourse to personal myth, possibly in a quasi-historical framework (Wesker, Delaney) or simply the use of more and more non-naturalistic language within a basically realistic framework (Owen, Exton, Shaffer). Only Pinter, the incorrigible individualist, stands aloof from all this: perversely, his plays are getting more and more realistic, though carrying with them, like those of the equally eccentric but as yet less accomplished Henry Livings and David Perry, a charge of personal obsession sufficient to blow their audiences sky-high if they are not handled with care.

And who will survive of all these bright new talents? It is anyone's guess, but perhaps one would not be too far wrong to suggest that the Theatre Workshop dramatists will go to pieces without Joan Littlewood to guide them, Osborne will develop – *Luther* has already shown the way – into a good, reliable commercial dramatist, Arden will at last achieve his long-

deferred success with the public (perhaps with the aid of Peter Hall at the Aldwych), David Campton will finally make his mark in the West End, and the long-term staying power will prove to be in the hands of Arden, Owen, Exton, and Pinter, since for them drama comes naturally, but each play marks a further widening and deepening of their potential range. If they can keep their freshness of vision intact, their self-critical faculty driving them always to write a new play as much as anything to remedy the defects of the last – and why not, seeing that they have managed it so far? – there is no reason why they should not go on for ever.

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